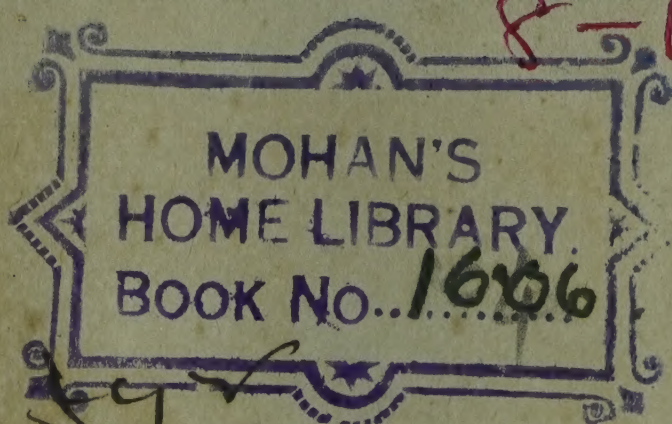


THE GOOD INTENTIONS OF ANGELA

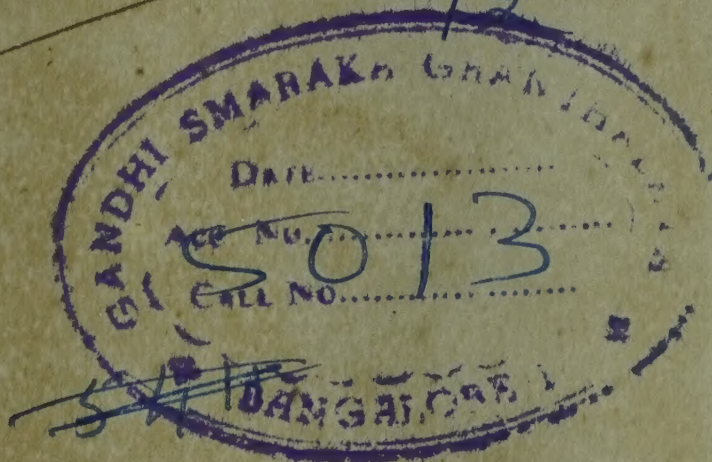


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THE GOOD INTENTIONS
OF ANGELA



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QUICKSILVER
THE RUNAWAY PRINCESS
TATTERS

104



“ ‘ Angel—let’s run ! ’ whispered Michael, ‘ I believe he’s coming after us. ’ ” (Page 219.)

THE GOOD INTENTIONS OF ANGELA

BY
ISABEL M. PEACOCKE

GANDHI PEACE FOUNDATION
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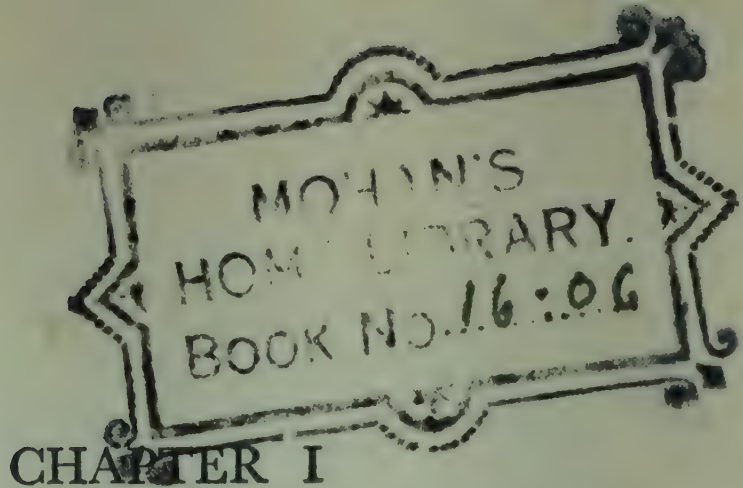
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**This Story of Angela of the Good Intentions
With an Honourable Mention of Michael
is dedicated to
The “ Would-Be-Goods ” of
This Generation and Any Other.**

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IMPS ON HOLIDAY

WHEN Mr. Standish decided to take a six months' business trip from New Zealand to Australia and Mrs. Standish decided to accompany him, the question naturally arose as to what was to be done with the two children, Angela aged eight, and Michael a seven-year-old.

Just as naturally, Mrs. Standish, who had been lovely Nancy Blair, and, her sister Kitty said, utterly spoiled by everybody, decided that it would be nice for dear Kitty and Mother to have her cherubs for what her husband called "the duration."

"You know how Mother loves them, George," said Mrs. Standish persuasively, "and it will be good for Kitty, too, a fresh

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interest apart from her old chickens and ducks and dairy. So stodgy for such a nice little thing as Kitty."

"Yes, that's all very well, my dear," returned her husband. "Of course the kids are gorgeous from a proud parent's point of view, but truth compels me to admit they're not exactly little saints out of a stained glass window. For sheer will power and best intentions which always go astray in practice, I think our daughter would be hard to beat, and Michael——"

"Michael's an angel," broke in his mother, "His little fits of mischief are nothing but fun, and Angela means no harm either."

"But it's hardly fair to ask your mother and Kitty to join in their fun for such a long period as six months," persisted Mr. Standish who, though immensely proud and fond of his children, was a fair-minded man.

"Oh, they'll love having them," declared Mrs. Standish, "I'll write Mother to-night and ask her to wire me in reply."

And a day or two later she triumphantly

IMPS ON HOLIDAY

displayed a telegram from her mother, saying the children would be more than welcome.

“ I knew it,” she said ; “ Kitty and Mother need something to love and care for.”

“ I should have thought two or three cows and other assorted livestock would have given them enough to love and care for,” murmured her husband, “ but have it your own way, my dear ; they’re your people and if they are being imposed upon, it’s your doing and not mine.”

* * * *

“ Alan,” said Kitty Blair to the young man who had called for her in his big, shiny new car, “ I’m frightfully sorry, but my sister has wished her two kiddies on to us and we’ll have to take them to the Show.”

“ Oh, I say,” Alan Moffat’s face fell, “ that’s a bit thick, Kitty. A parcel of kids ! Can’t you park ’em somewhere ? ”

He liked youngsters well enough, but this was to have been his special day when he meant to ask Kitty the most important question on earth, and now it was to be spoiled.

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Kitty—looking distractingly pretty, with a warm flush on her cheek and a resentful sparkle in her blue eyes, was trying to restrain the activities of a sturdy boy and girl who were jumping on and off the running board and wrenching at the door-handles of the car.

“No, I can’t leave them,” she said shortly. “Michael, get down—they *are* imps—but they’re dears all the same—Angela, *dear*!—you mustn’t! It’s their Christmas holidays and I can’t disappoint them.”

“Sooner disappoint me,” growled Moffat. “Leave that radiator cap alone, youngster.” The small boy jumped.

“I only bet Angel I could unscrew it,” he volunteered.

“And I bet you don’t,” growled its owner.

“If you want to call our arrangement off, Alan, do so,” said Kitty tartly.

“Well,” Alan forced a laugh, “I’m not much good as assistant nursemaid . . . fishing kids from under horses’ hoofs or stuffing ’em with sweets. I hate to make a show of myself——”

IMPS ON HOLIDAY

"You needn't," flashed Kitty, "it's your unbearable conceit makes you so afraid of making yourself conspicuous."

"Oh, hop in," growled Moffat, "and let's be off."

"I shouldn't dream of it," declared a flushed Kitty, grasping a hand of each child. "You had better pick up your pretty widow. She won't bother you with any of her poor little encumbrances."

"If you take that tone, I just might," snapped Alan irritably. "Now come on—don't let's fool away any more time. Oh, I say—Kitty—you little idiot——"

For Kitty had abruptly left him, dragging the two children with her, and furiously he drove off. Kitty drove the children in the rattling, asthmatical old Ford, coldly infuriated by her nephew's candid remark :

"I say, Aunt Kit, you were a mutt not to go in that chap's corker car."

The Show was like a thousand others of its kind, with its pens of fat cattle, pigs and sheep, and its horses which during eleven

GOOD INTENTIONS OF ANGELA

months of the year were the patient, homely, rough-coated drudges of the farm and now hardly knew themselves with their silky crimped manes, and banded tails tied up with bright ribbons. There were the usual booths and side-shows, and the inevitable merry-go-round with its prancing spotted steeds and the mechanical negro grinding out mechanical tunes.

But the children were in the highest spirits ; Michael's merry little freckled face and dancing eyes were alight with interest, and Angela's ethereal looks, so belied by the human mischief in her composition, drew many admiring glances. Kitty felt flat but tried to respond to the eager interest of her charges as they dragged her from one exhibit to another.

" Oh, what a 'normous pig. It's just like that man, isn't it ? " came Michael's ringing tones and Angela's clear treble, " Oh, 'zactly —isn't it, Aunt Kit ? "

" Look at the dear little lambs ? " cried Kitty hastily, though secretly compelled to agree with the verdict.

IMPS ON HOLIDAY

The children were not interested in lambs and dragged her off to the tent of the "real live mermaid." They came out again however, disgustedly declaring that she was "only a woman with her feet wrapped up in a bath."

They sampled in turn the "two-headed calf," the performing seals, and the ape-man, in the tent of the latter creating a scene which ended in mingled roars of laughter and angry accusations of fraud.

The ape-man, apparently ignorant of the fact that apes are tail-less, sported a long and sinuous caudal appendage. From the first Michael was fascinated by this phenomenon, and while the keeper was explaining that he was obliged to keep the tent dark and a barrier up between the crowd and his exhibit, because the beast was still savage and untamed, Michael, unnoticed by anyone save Angela, dodged under the barrier and climbed on to the platform. The ape-man's long convoluted tail was at the moment stretched straight out and Michael's sharp eyes detected a rent near

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its hairy tip through which shone the gleam of steel. Up to this moment Michael had firmly believed in the genuineness of the ape-man, but now he shouted indignantly : " It isn't a monkey at all—I can see its springs."

Then he seized the tail in both hands and tugged sharply. Ape-man and keeper yelled furiously ; the crowd laughed and boomed. It is doubtful if one in a hundred believed the ape-man to be genuine, but now the crowd began to believe itself tricked, and the hisses and boos were louder than the laughter.

" Come down at once, Michael," cried Kitty, but Angela shrieked excitedly : " Hang on, Micky, I'll come and help ! "

Michael suddenly fell backwards off the platform still grasping the tail.

There was a horrid rending sound, a furious roar, yells of mirth, and there was an astonished small boy grasping a ragged " tail " in his hands and a maddened and tail-less ape-man gibbering at his keeper in a good, rich Irish brogue. Kitty hurried her charges away



“The children . . . dragged her off to the tent of the ‘real live mermaid.’ ”

IMPS ON HOLIDAY

disregarding Michael's entreaty that they should demand their money back because it was a cheat.

"No, and for goodness' sake don't try to unmask any more frauds," she said sternly; "you know how angry the mermaid was when Angel pinched her tail."

"It wasn't a real tail either," said Angela, "'cos it didn't hurt till I stuck a pin in and then she screeched 'Ow, me leg!' Serve her right for pretending to be a dear little mermaid!"

"But the two-headed calf was all right," said Michael, "unless," he added suspiciously, "the other head was sewed on. Let's go back and pinch it, Angel."

But Angela's attention was diverted at this moment.

"Oh, Auntie," she cried in her clear penetrating tones, "there's that horrid man that wouldn't take us in his car."

Kitty coloured furiously, for at Angela's remark Alan Moffat and the lady with him both turned their heads. The lady was the

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pretty widow—met entirely by chance—on Alan's part at least, had Kitty known it—and as her escort rather stiffly lifted his hat, she smiled and bowed.

“Here's the merry-go-round,” Kitty gasped confusedly, and the children made a delighted dash for it, each climbing a charger with a wild eye and flaring nostril. The horses were in pairs and Angela's riding companion was a flashily-dressed youth who said instantly :

“You can't have that horse, kid ; I'm keeping that for my young lady.”

“Don't get down, Angel !” shouted Michael, “you've as much right as he has.”

Angela's dreamy little face instantly assumed the obstinate expression her family knew so well, and suddenly the machine began to revolve to the piercing strains of the melodian. Round and round went the prancing steeds, the laughing children and the grinning negro. The youth kept up a steady stream of sarcastic remarks, shouting them to his girl-friend each time the machine passed her. Angela's eyes grew bright, her cheeks very pink, ominous

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signs to those who knew her best, indicating the onset of one of her brief devastating rages. The youth, however, oblivious of his impending doom, rode on grinning and sneering, and suddenly Angela, withdrawing one small sturdily-shod foot from its stirrup, delivered a sharp kick at the ankle nearest her. The youth winced violently, lost his stirrup, and with a yell clapped his hand to his ankle while Angela, that angel-child, leaned over and snatching the smart straw hat from his head, sent it skimming out among the heads of the crowd. Full in the face of an innocent bystander the hat flew and slashed his nose so that the blood flowed, and his yell of fury rent the air. The youth, making a clutch after his departing headgear, lost his balance and pitched head-first off his mount, landing in a huddled heap at the feet of his charmer. Someone screamed, the music died with a long-drawn groan and the machine came to an abrupt stop, the man in charge in a towering rage demanded the unhappy youth's name and address.

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“What d’you think you’re playin’ at? Up to monkey tricks,” he stormed. A stranger holding a blood-stained handkerchief to his nose came up and furiously rated the crest-fallen young man who, with his carefully oiled forelock falling into his eyes, green stains on his white trouser-knees, and his nose rapidly swelling from its impact with the ground, now struggled to his feet.

His friend muttered coldly : “A nice fool you look, and a nice show you’ve made of us. Come away !” and the shattered young man moved off pursued by the laughter of the crowd and the threats of the injured.

Kitty, who had seen it all, hurried the children away.

“What will you be doing next?” she groaned.

“Can we have some lunch, Auntie?” suggested Michael cheerfully.

“Well, you can’t get into much mischief here,” she said with a sigh of relief as they entered the refreshment tent, and considered that she had got off lightly with no greater

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mishaps than Angela upsetting a plate of cream-cakes into the lap of a stiff dowager, and Michael firing bread pellets at the bald head of an elderly man who was lunching and reading at the same time. Kitty was busily apologising and wiping down the dress of the outraged matron, and it was only the suffocated mirth of the children which at last told her some mischief was afoot. Glancing round she saw the victim absent-mindedly slapping at what he imagined to be flies each time a pellet hit him, and sternly putting a stop to this innocent diversion, she led them both out of the tent in disgrace.

“What’s in that tent, Auntie?” asked Angela, pointing to a large closed tent with a notice on the flap: “Judging.”

Kitty told her that this tent held the cookery exhibits, and that the judges were now engaged in making their awards.

“You’ll get first prize, I bet, Auntie Kit,” said Michael.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Kitty smiling, “I might if you were the judge.”

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Then Kitty met a group of friends, and while she was chatting and laughing with them, Michael pulled Angela's sleeve.

"I saw the judges coming out of the cookery tent," he muttered. "Let's go in and be first to tell Auntie Kitty how many prizes she's won."

The tent-flap was still down, however, but after a little prospecting Angela discovered a place at the back where they could crawl under the canvas. Soon, with grass-stained knees and hands, they stood in the subdued light of the large tent. Long trestle-tables, covered by snowy cloths long enough to hide the supports, were laden with plates and dishes, many of them decorated with red or blue tickets, indicating that their contents had secured first or second awards. A rapid survey of the tables brought them to Aunt Kitty's exhibit of small cakes, fruit cake, and scones. They were stupefied to find only one ticket leaning against her plate and that not the coveted red, but the comparatively insignificant blue of second place. Angela drew a long breath and turned pink.

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“The mean beasts!” she gasped, and Michael, equally indignant, muttered:

“One measly second prize—Angel, we’ll give Auntie Kit a prize.”

He walked away to a table where a large cut fruit cake was decorated with a red ticket. “First Prize,” read Michael and calmly removed the ticket and placed it against Kitty’s modest fruit cake, “Auntie Kit’s plum cake is corker!”

“And her little cakes are lovely,” declared Angela, and selecting another red ticket from a plate of frosted small cakes, she ostentatiously laid it on top of Kitty’s exhibit of rock cakes.

“They’ve only given her second prize for her scones,” said Michael musingly, “here goes!” and a third red ticket was put to Kitty’s credit. Michael hesitated and then he said, “I say, Angel—these judges haven’t been fair. Here’s one lot got three reds and another poor beggar’s got none. We ought to do something about it.”

A faraway but purposeful glint came into

GOOD INTENTIONS OF ANGELA

Angela's soft eyes ; this was a challenge from her brother, she knew, for her to think up something audacious in the way of mischief, and Angela never failed to respond to a challenge.

" I know ! " she said after a moment. " Let's c'lect all the tickets 'cept Aunt Kitty's ; then we'll shut our eyes and you walk down one side of the tables and me the other, sticking the tickets on the plates without looking. Then it'll be fair ! "

Michael nodded. " Good idea ! " he said patronisingly.

When the tickets were redistributed however, Angela said with some misgiving : " What'll they do when they find out ? We've mixed them so we don't know where to put them back."

" They won't know ! " declared Michael airily. " The ladies that judged came from town and Mrs. Hilton has driven them to the train already." A slight sound at the doorway startled them and silently both children dropped to their knees and crept under the

IMPS ON HOLIDAY

table where the long cloth completely concealed them. Peeping under its edge they saw Aunt Kitty enter, glance round hurriedly and go out again.

Angela stifled a giggle. "We better stay here," muttered Michael, "till she's gone right away."

Then suddenly the flap of the tent was flung back, a stream of sunlight poured in and a chattering crowd of women entered. There was a buzz of talk, sharp exclamations of astonishment, gratification or chagrin.

"Well!—I never expected a prize for *my* scones!"

"Just look here—a pound cake like that to win a first and Mrs. Hilton who's won the prize for years not even a 'highly commended.'"

"Well, of course the *prize* is nothing to me—but I do rather pride myself on my pikelets and not even a 'mention'!"

"Kitty Blair! *Three* firsts! Congratulations, Kitty! But isn't it rather a surprise?"

"It's ridiculous!" came Kitty's voice, puzzled and almost apprehensive, "there

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are a dozen fruit cakes better than mine.”

“There’s something queer about this,” said a matron grimly. “Look at those sickly-looking biscuits with a first !”

Then came another voice, cool and drawling, the voice of the “pretty widow.”

“I’m sorry to have to say someone was in this tent just before it was opened to the public.”

“Name ! Name !” came a buzz of indignant voices.

“Well, I’ve waited for her to speak, but since you insist—Mr. Moffat and I both saw Miss Blair coming out of the tent. Didn’t we, Alan ?”

Alan Moffat in the doorway said savagely : “Certainly we saw her, but what on earth has that to do with this fiasco ?”

Then came the cool, crisp voice of Mrs. Hilton, head of the ladies’ committee and acknowledged leader : “Please, Mr. Moffat—will you allow Miss Blair herself to explain——”

“Yes,” said Kitty rather tremulously, “I did come in here for a second looking for my

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nephew and niece. I feared they might be in mischief and so——”

“Most unfortunate !” said the icy voice.

“I just glanced in and went out again,” said Kitty bravely.

“Hmn ! A great pity !”

“What do you mean ?” flared Kitty. “Are you accusing me—— ?”

“I have accused you of nothing, Miss Blair,” said Mrs. Hilton. “I have here a list of prize-winners handed me by the judges. The name of Miss Blair appears as having won a second for scones.”

“But—but——” Kitty’s tones were on the edge of angry tears, “surely you don’t believe that I——” she paused to swallow an unbearable lump in her throat.

Some of the ladies, kindly folk, glanced at her sympathetically, but others looked at her in a cold silence, and in the twilight gloom under the table Michael made a hideous grimace at Angela, which he always did when he feared he was going to disgrace himself by crying. Angela looked away hastily ; she

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wished vindictively she could pinch the ankles of the ladies as they passed along the edge of the tablecloth. Then a pair of feet, evidently those of a man passed rapidly along the edge of the cloth.

“What rot!” came a man’s indignant voice. “To think for a moment that Miss Blair would play such a low-down trick for a tin-pot prize!”

A woman’s cool laugh followed and then came Kitty’s voice, passionately angry, unbearably hurt: “Thank-you, Mr. Moffat! But apparently no-one else shares your belief in my honesty,” and she gave a shaky laugh which was like a sob.

And suddenly there was a crash. One of the trestle tables had collapsed and there was a landslide of cakes, pies and scones, while two grass-stained, scared-faced children extricated themselves from the folds of the tablecloth and the ruins of the food. Michael cried out in a quavering voice, fiercely determined not to cry: “It was us what did it! We gave Aunt Kitty the prizes and changed all the others.”

IMPS ON HOLIDAY

“ ’Cos you were mean things and only gave her a stingy little second ! ” shrilled Angela, angry tears in her eyes.

Angry women were trying to pick out their own exhibits among the horrid debris on the ground, and Mrs. Hilton was staring in petrified fury at the ruins of a magnificent pound cake, which Alan Moffat’s unheeding foot had accidentally crushed into the grassy floor as he pushed his way out of the tent, passing the “ pretty widow ” with a cold stare of dislike. Kitty, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, to shake the children soundly or to hug them for their championship of herself, was roused by the sharp voice of Mrs. Hilton :

“ Miss Blair, I apologise—but you had better take those abominable children home.”

“ I think we’ll call it a day and go home,” said Kitty wearily, as they went across the paddock with the reluctant hand of a dragging child firmly clasped in each of hers.

“ Oh, no ! ” protested Angela. “ We haven’t seen half of things——”

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"Don't speak to me," she said sternly.
"I'm very angry with you both."

But all the same she couldn't help giving a surreptitious squeeze to the limp, sticky hands she held, for had they not braved the thunders and lightnings of wrath for her sake?

At the gate Alan Moffat was waiting for them with his car.

"Kitty," he cried, "I couldn't trust myself any longer in that tent in case I should say more than I ought—to ladies. And it was more than half my fault for leaving you to manage that handful alone. Forgive me, old girl!"

"Yes, Alan," said Kitty with a demure twinkle, "since I find that after all you don't mind making a show of yourself in a good cause."

"Well, jump in," said Alan. "In you get, kids, you demon-pair! It's all right about your car, Kitty. I've arranged for the garage man who looks after my car to drive it home for you."

CHAPTER II

THE IMPS AT HOME

ALAN drew up smartly at the gate of Mrs. Blair's small suburban farmlet where Kitty and her mother made a modest livelihood with poultry and dairy produce for sale.

"Here we are, youngsters," he said, "hop out and tell your Granny that Auntie Kit is coming for a drive with me."

Kitty started and opened her lips to speak, but Alan's hand lightly pressed hers and she subsided.

"A drive? Oh, corker! We'll come too!" Michael volunteered cheerily, but Alan shook his head.

"No," he said, "I want to talk to your Aunt Kitty."

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“ Is it a secret ? ” demanded Angela. “ Well, we won’t listen—honest to goodness ! Cross my breafe ! ”

She settled herself firmly in her corner, her small fingers closing tenaciously on the door-handle. Alan swung down from his seat and opened the rear door. Kitty sat back with a demure smile, declining, as she said, to take any part in the struggle. She knew her nephew and niece.

“ Out you get ! ” said Alan good-naturedly but firmly, and with a sudden movement he grabbed the small boy and pulled him out of the car. “ Come now, little girl,” he went on, holding out his hand to Angela who sat mute but stubborn in her corner, making herself as small as possible. Kitty smiled a small secret smile . . . a tussle with the Angel-child as she was known in the family, always left anyone who undertook it exhausted. Let Alan deal with it !

“ Come now,” said Alan persuasively, “ there’s a good girl—get out ! ”

“ I don’t want to ! ” remarked Angela.

THE IMPS AT HOME

“ Well, I can’t help that. I don’t want you in my car. I’ve had enough of you. We’ve both had enough of you.”

“ Aunt Kitty hasn’t ! ”

“ Yes, she has ! More than enough ! Out you come ! ”

Angela said nothing but tightened her grip on the door-handle and looked out of the window. Alan began to feel flustered, but his blood was up.

“ Well,” he said sternly, “ I hate to use force to a lady—but if I must I must——” and reaching into the car he laid firm but gentle hands on the dainty little person of Angela. Then began a silent but determined struggle for mastery, which Kitty, it is to be regretted to state, regarded with amusement, deeming the contestants well matched, Alan in physical strength and her niece in will-power. Michael regarded the struggle with the liveliest interest, his sympathies being with his sister, and taking the form of harassing Alan in the rear by hanging on to his knees and trying to encourage Nip, the terrier, to an assault in the

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rear. Nip, however, reserved judgment. He was very fond of Angela and was a little uneasy, contributing a good deal of noise and fuss and flurry to the proceedings, by skirmishing round and barking shrilly, but he declined to take a more active part.

While Alan, half-in and half-out of the car, pulled and tugged, Angela sat back in her corner still grimly clutching the handle, her tenacious little fingers having a surprisingly strong grip. Alan tugged, Alan grunted, Alan all but said something not seemly to be said, but Angela said nothing; her face was flushed, her small regular white teeth were clenched on her lower lip, but there were no tears.

She only shed tears when her sympathies were aroused unbearably, when she would weep angrily and copiously, and be very savage to everyone. At last, when Alan began to feel ridiculous and distinctly annoyed, sheer force prevailed. Angela felt her grip weakening, her fingers slipping and realising that she was beaten, determined to turn defeat into

THE IMPS AT HOME

victory. Swiftly she turned the door-handle and with a well-directed thrust into Alan's waistcoat with her heel she freed herself and stepped airily out of the car, with the result that Alan with a breathless grunt fell forward, sprawling into it. Kitty could not resist one spontaneous trill of joyous laughter as his hat went flying off his head.

"Here, Nip!" cried Michael, seizing the opportunity. "Fetch it, boy!"

The terrier, delighted to see Angela emerging safe and sound, pounced on the hat and streaked away with it, tossing and worrying it as if it were a rat, Michael following in an ecstasy of mirth. Angela, with her head in the air, remarked, "Good-bye, Aunt Kitty, I've had enough of that car," and walked away to the house ignoring Aunt Kitty's reproving words which were, unfortunately for discipline, marred by frequent little hic-coughs of mirth.

Alan was chasing the dog and presently returned to the car straightening out a some-

GOOD INTENTIONS OF ANGELA

what chewed and seedy-looking hat, and looking very exasperated.

Kitty had to let her mirth have its way for the moment when she glanced at his grim face and the teeth-marks on the brim of his hat.

“ I’ll have to get a new hat,” he muttered. “ Cost me a guinea, but I would not mind that if I might have a real old-fashioned fatherly session with Angel-face for about ten minutes.”

“ I’m sorry, Alan—I am, really——” gasped Kitty weakly. “ I know they’re fiends—but really it was—it was—too—f-funny——” and off she went again.

“ Don’t apologise,” said Alan grimly, but even he could not resist a grin as he thought of Angela’s masterly tactics which had certainly turned the laugh on him. “ Little demon,” he muttered, “ but never mind—at last I have you all to myself.”

Their grandmother met the children at the door.

“ Well, pets,” she cried, “ had a good day ? But where is your Auntie ? ”

THE IMPS AT HOME

“She’s gone for a drive with a man who’s going to tell her secrets,” replied Angela.

“Secrets?” echoed Mrs. Blair, puzzled.
“How do you mean? Is it Mr. Moffat?”

If so she understood very well the secret Mr. Moffat would tell Kitty; it was no secret to her, she decided with a wise old smile, for the young man could hardly keep his eyes off her pretty daughter whenever he came to the house.

“It must be secrets,” persisted Angela, “’cos he wouldn’t let me and Michael come case we’d hear. We don’t care for his old secrets—we got a better secret, haven’t we, Mikey—what we won’t tell him——”

“Yes,” replied Michael obligingly. “What is our secret, Angel? Tell me.”

Angela tossed her small golden head exasperatedly; Michael was very silly sometimes letting Granny know they really had no secret, but she determined that they would soon have one.

“What did you see at the Show?” asked Granny, seeing that for some reason her little

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granddaughter was ruffled, and over the tea-table she listened to an amazing medley of mermaids whose tails were cheats, and monkeys whose tails came off if you just touched them, and a two-headed calf which was a really-truly calf and not just sewed on; and then came a long confused description of the affair in the judging tent wherein it was made to appear that they had only wanted to help Aunt Kitty to win a prize but Aunt Kitty was angry with them. Granny was scandalised but diverted, and was in duty bound to point out that it was very wrong to take away prize tickets from those who had rightfully won them and give them to a person who had not.

“But Gran,” spluttered Michael with his mouth full, “it wasn’t fair not to give poor Aunt Kit a prize—not one ’cept a silly old red ticket. Her cakes are corker !”

“And,” put in Angela vindictively, “I’m glad the first prize cake got treaded on——”

“Trodded on,” said Michael mechanically ; it was one of his missions in life to correct the verbal slips of his sister, who in spite of her

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year's seniority and sophistication had surprising and rather lovable lapses into baby speech at times. Too dismayed to correct either of them Mrs. Blair exclaimed : " Oh, my dears ! That would be Mrs. Hilton's cake. She always wins. Surely you didn't tread on her beautiful cake ? "

" No, Alan did—and smashed it to bits."

" Alan, my dear ? You are too young to call him Alan——"

" Well, Auntie Kitty calls him Alan——"

" That's different, but never mind it now. You don't mean that Alan—Mr. Moffat actually trod on Mrs. Hilton's cake ? "

Angela nodded and Michael added with satisfaction, " He kicked it and it was all mashed up on the grass . . . no one could eat a bit of it 'cept dogs and fowls."

" But I can't understand. What on earth would Mr. Moffat kick—tread on Mrs. Hilton's cake for—and how could it get on the grass ? "

" When the table fell over," replied Angela solemnly, fixing her enormous blue eyes on her grandmother's face.

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“ Oh, the table fell over ? How was that ? ”

“ Me and Michael,” said Angela in a small voice, for she had the merit of being truthful.

“ Angela ! ” Granny was not often shocked at her darlings’ misdemeanours, usually making many excuses for them, but this time she was horrified. “ You don’t mean you and Michael pushed over the table with all the cakes on ? ”

“ Just by axibent ! ” excused Michael looking rather warm in the cheeks.

“ How very careless ! How could you do such a thing ? ” exclaimed their grandmother in vexation. “ You were leaning on it, I suppose ? How often I have told you not to lean on things.”

“ Trying to get out from underneath,” explained Angela. “ The tablecloth was too long and we got all mixed in it. It wasn’t a really-truly table ’cos the top was loose and when we got mixed in the cloth—oh ! there was a smash and a crash and all the cakes was mixed on the ground and the scones and the jam and everything—weren’t they, Mikey ? ”

Michael nodded with a reminiscent smile of

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satisfaction and Mrs. Blair said sharply :
“ You sound quite pleased about it and we’ll never hear the last of it from Mrs. Hilton. What on earth were you doing under the table ? ”

“ Just kneeling down there.”

“ But why ? What on earth was Kitty doing to let you get under the table ? ”

“ She didn’t know about it,” Angela confessed with a yawn which Michael capped with another even wider, and Mrs. Blair said hastily :

“ Oh well—I can see you’re both tired to death . . . so we’ll say no more about it to-night. Come—off to bed ! ”

In duty bound they protested of course. No self-respecting child would dream of going to bed without protest, no matter how tired, and during the process of undressing and washing of sunburnt hands and faces they yawned repeatedly, but still persisted that they were not a bit tired and wanted to stay up until Aunt Kitty returned. But in the middle of saying her prayers with a special petition that

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Alan might be made very sorry for refusing to take her in his car, Angela's fair head nodded and her voice trailed off in a sleepy mumble. So Granny bundled her into bed, kissing the flushed face and heavy blue eyes fondly. Yet when Michael was tucked in too, and Granny had pulled down the blinds quietly, and tip-toed out of the room, Angela flung over on her back with a sleepy sigh, rubbed both fists into her eyes and sat up.

"Michael Standish !"

"Um ?" Michael was drowsy, deliciously hovering on the borderland from which it is such torment to be dragged back.

"You awake ?"

"N-no ! Are you ?"

"Wake up ! I've thinked something !"

"Thought"—very sleepily—"Um-m !"

"Thought then—oh, do wake up. It's very important——" Angela leaned over the edge of her bed and catching up her soft little blue bedroom slipper she sent it whizzing through the air. Her aim, by a pure fluke, was perfect, for the slipper landed smack on Michael's

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nose. He sat up with an indignant snort, rubbing his nose irritably, then snatching up the slipper sent it flying back, but Angela was now only a little blue hump under the bedclothes and the slipper landed harmlessly. Then her pretty impish little face popped up again.

“ I’m glad you waked up, Michael darling ! ” she said sweetly, “ ’Cos I’ve thinked—thought of a good idea.”

Angela’s “ ideas ” were always so good in the way of entertainment that Michael could not help listening, so he gave a half-mollified grunt and slid down under the bedclothes. Angela sat up hugging her knees.

“ Well—what ? ” demanded Michael a little sulkily ; his nose still stung.

“ Mikey,” said Angela impressively, “ I made up my mind I’m going to forgive Aunt Kitty.”

“ So’m I. What for, Angel ? ”

“ Well, ’cos the Bible in Sunday School says you must forgive all your emenies——”

“ En-emies ! ” said Michael.

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“ Well, I said emenies—but I’m not going to forgive that Alan man. He’s not my—my—en-emy. I wouldn’t have him for my enemy—not giving us a ride in his car.”

“ Um-m ! ” Michael was getting sleepy again and his sister cried sharply :

“ Michael—don’t go to sleep again—we got to give Aunt Kitty a prize—poor dear ! ”

“ How ? ” muttered Michael.

“ We got to buy her a nice prize—a dimond gold bracelet and a silk dress and a pennorth of changing balls.”

“ But you haven’t got any money.”

“ Yes, we have—the five shillings in your money-box what Uncle Bill gave you for your birthday.”

“ But that’s mine ! ”

Michael was effectually roused at last ; that five shillings had been spent in fond imagination over and over again on things most dear to boyish hearts ; a cricket bat and ball, a model aeroplane ; tons of ice-cream, a trip to the pictures, but still he hesitated unable quite to make up his mind. And here was

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Angela coolly proposing to spend it on such silly things as dimond-gold bracelets or silk dresses. Michael was very fond of his Aunt Kitty but this sacrifice was too much to ask.

He sat up, his fair hair tousled, his blue eyes sparkling with indignation, his cheeks flushed.

“What cheek!” he spluttered. “That’s my five shillings what I’m going to buy a aeroplane or a Meccano with, or p’raps a new bike when I get a bit more. What about the sixpence Daddy gave you for letting him pull your loose tooth out?”

“It comed out too quick!” Angela explained briefly, fitting her little pink tongue into the tiny gap left by a first tooth which had hung by a thread for days, “and I got to wait till another tooth gets shivery and now I got all my new teeth it might be a long time ’fore I can ask Daddy for another sixpence.”

“I could make one loose for you,” offered Michael, but Angela shook her head, so he

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went on, "haven't you got any money in your money-box?"

"Only two pennies and I owe those to Mummy for losing my best hair-clips again—but p'raps she'll forget about it," said Angela hopefully; she shed hair-clips from her thick abundant curls as profusely and constantly as a hen sheds feathers at moulting time, and apparently quite as indifferently. She reflected for some minutes over the possibility of persuading Michael to devote his birthday five shillings to his Aunt Kitty, but when she spoke again Michael was asleep so soundly that she knew it would be useless to try to arouse him again. So she, too, snuggled down, and with a small brown hand tucked under a rosy cheek she slept the sleep of innocence and good intentions.

It had been a good day, taken all round.

* * * *

When Kitty came home with her pretty cheeks flushed and her eyes like stars, she wondered just a little at the warmth of her mother's kiss.

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“Mummy,” she said with a little unsteady laugh, “I’ve something to tell you——”

“I know, dear,” said her mother placidly smiling.

“But how could you know?” cried Kitty amazed, “I didn’t know myself until Alan—at least of course I—in a way—anyhow I couldn’t know *positively*——”

Her mother laughed: “Aren’t you getting a little involved, dear? It was Angela told me!”

“Angela? The little monkey! How on earth could she have known? She’s positively uncanny.”

“Well, I don’t suppose she actually knew what Alan was going to say to you,” said her [mother smiling, “but she said he wanted to talk secrets to you and would not take her and Michael for a drive—Happy, dear?”

Kitty laughed a soft, gay laugh and kissed her mother.

“’Normously,” she replied lightly, “Alan

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wanted to come in but I wanted to tell you myself and now that little imp's got in ahead of me. She's altogether too sharp. Oh, Mother—they've been demons all day ! ”

“ What's all this about Alan Moffat making a football of Mrs. Hilton's prize cake ? ”

Kitty burst out laughing again and gave a gay whimsical description of the day's doings, ending with the declaration : “ Mother, the children are dears, of course, but they are a trial to weak nerves. They've been fearfully spoiled and you never know what they'll do next. When I think of that awful mess of cakes and pies and scones on the ground, and all those women—some of them glaring, some goggling—a few giggling—and Alan setting his great flat foot—quite accidentally, poor darling—on Mrs. Hilton's pound cake as neatly as if he had done it on purpose, because he knows I never could ‘ abide the woman ’—well, I don't know whether to laugh or cry,” said Kitty, and decided that point by going off into fresh peals of laughter.

“ They have been very naughty,” remarked

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her mother with a twinkle, "and Mrs. Hilton will never forgive us, but Kitty, the poor little dears were only being loyal to you after all, and one can forgive a great deal to loyalty."

"Well," said Kitty, "I should like it demonstrated in a less nerve-racking way for my part."

CHAPTER III

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IN the morning, somewhat to the children's surprised relief, Aunt Kitty received them with smiles and friendliness, though she called them "naughty rascals" and said they had disgraced her forever. In the afternoon appeared that "horrid Alan man," as Angela called him and lo! he, too, was most friendly, clapping Michael on the shoulder and giving a friendly tug to Angela's curls and presenting them each with a box of chocolates, only a little less resplendent than the one he presented to Aunt Kitty.

He also suggested that they should now call him "Uncle" Alan.

"But you are not our uncle," Angela remarked in her direct way, "we've got all

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the uncles we need—Uncle Bill and Uncle Fred and Great Uncle Henry.”

“ Still,” suggested Alan coaxingly, “ couldn’t you do with one more ? I’d make a jolly good uncle. Just try me for a bit.”

“ Yes, we’ll give him a try, Angel,” said Michael, adding a stage whisper, “ remember his bosker big car.”

“ He wouldn’t drive us in it,” Angela reminded him severely.

“ Oh, he wasn’t our uncle then. Let him be our uncle and see. We needn’t keep him if we don’t like him.”

So Angela with a rather reserved little nod accepted this new uncle on probation. She had not, however, forgotten her plan of procuring a prize for Aunt Kitty and once more reminded Michael of the five shillings in his money box. Michael squirmed and hesitated.

“ Don’t you love Auntie Kitty ? ” demanded Angela sternly.

“ Yes—but——” Michael wriggled reluctantly.

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“Then we must give her a prize.”

“Or-right,” Michael nodded a little sulkily, “but can’t we give her some useful thing like—like—a bike, what we could learn to ride on.”

“Ladies don’t like bikes. They can’t go to parties if they only have bikes for prizes. They got to have silk dresses and bangles.”

“Well,” protested her brother calculatingly, “will it take all the five shillings to buy a silk dress and a bangle-thing and—and——”

“A penn’orth of changing balls,” Angela supplied swiftly.

“Aunt Kitty doesn’t like changing balls,” remarked Michael, “she says it makes her ’ick when we take them out to look what colour they’ve turned into after we’ve sucked them.”

“Oh, well—if she doesn’t like the changing balls we can eat them and she can just have the silk dress and the bangle. She’ll love them, Mikey.”

Michael, however, hopeful that at least part of his five shillings might be saved from the

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wreck had a private interview with his grandmother.

“Granny, d’you think it would take the whole of five bob to buy a silk dress and a dimond-gold bangle and some changing balls——”

“Five *bob*, Michael?”

“Five shillings then—would it take it all?”

“Much more, dear—silk dresses and bangles are very expensive, but what have you got in your little head now? What do you want with silk dresses?”

“It’s a secret, Granny—but—but you’re sure five bo—shillings wouldn’t be enough.”

“Quite, quite sure, dear! Five pounds wouldn’t do it.”

Michael departed with a deep feeling of satisfaction; Angela could not possibly force him to waste his birthday money on useless things.

“No good,” he said to her with thinly disguised relief, “it’ll take more’n five pounds to buy those things, Angel—Granny says so.”

Angela turned deep pink with annoyance.

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“You told Granny? When you knew it was a secret,” and with that she launched herself upon her brother in one of her brief white-hot tempers. A harmless scuffle ensued until Michael finally rolled over on his back and Angela sat on his chest in triumph.

“Pax! Pax!” he gasped as his father always said when worsted in a struggle with two strong imps of children, and his sister rolled off his chest with a grin, all her brief rage spent.

“Well,” she said, “if it’s more than five shillings we’ll have to get more money. I’ll think about it.”

And when Angela said she would “think about” anything it was pretty safe to predict that she would plan out something really exciting.

It was this quality of leadership in her which made Michael, though “he was quite old enough to know better,” as his elders said, always follow his sister’s lead.

Angela’s plan was duly thought out and confided to him.

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“ We’ll have a Show, Mikey, of our own and charge money—real money—to come in. We’ll have it in the paggot——”

“ Paddock,” corrected Michael and as always when betrayed by excitement into baby-talk Angela blushed pink with annoyance.

“ But who’ll pay money to come into the paddock ? ” objected Michael. “ Anyone can get in under the fence.”

“ We’ll have Vulcan down by the fence. Everyone’s scared of a bull and they won’t know he never hurts anyone. He’ll be part of our Show—Angela and Michael Standish’s Wild Spanish Bull Vulcan—First Prize like it said at the Show.”

“ Crikey ! ” exclaimed Michael, suddenly fired by the idea. “ And Punch and Judy can be in the Show and I’ll do a Circus Act on Judy——”

“ No, I’ll do the act on Judy ’cos I thought of the circus first. You can have Punch.”

“ We’ll have Judy in turns then,” said Michael peaceably. “ What else can we do, Angel ? ”

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"We'll have Pansy, the Performing Pig—and Polly the Talking Parrot."

"But who'll come to the Show?" demanded Michael flatly, "'Cos anyone can see Vulcan and Pansy and the horses any day without paying to come in."

"Granny and Aunt Kitty and Uncle Alan will come. They'll pay sixpence each."

"That'll be three sixpences—only three," Michael reminded her.

"And your sixpence—that'll make four."

"But I'm not going to pay to come in. It'll be my own Show and no-one pays to go to their own circus act." Michael was indignant at the bare suggestion. "And if I pay you'll have to."

"I can't 'cos I haven't got sixpence," Angela explained blandly, "and we'll ask the Dover boys and Jill Seton to come."

"They'll never pay sixpence," muttered Michael pessimistically, "not just to see Vulcan and Pansy and the parrot—they've seen them hundreds of times."

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Angela stamped her small foot and the colour blazed in her little fair face.

“They will—they will—they’ll just have to,” she declared, “and I’ll ask Aunt Kitty to make us lots of little cakes and we’ll sell them and get lots of money. And we can get Miggs to come and Andrew. They’ll have to pay.”

Miggs was the farm-hand and Andrew his young son, but Michael scoffed at the idea that the man who looked after the beasts every day of his life would pay sixpence to come into the paddock to see them, and as for Andrew it was very doubtful if he ever had sixpence in his life and if he had, he would certainly not waste it by handing it over to Angela for the pleasure of looking at the animals he helped to care for.

But Angela swept all these difficulties aside and went to her grandmother for permission to use the paddock and the animals for the “Grand Show” ; A. & M. Standish, Props.”

She had seen “Props” on a booth at the Show and though she had a vague idea it

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meant clothes props it seemed the right thing to put in.

Mrs. Blair readily gave permission to use the paddock so long as they didn't tease the animals and Miggs didn't mind, but she was doubtful about making a charge for admission.

"I don't think that's quite nice, Angel dear," she said. "Let your little friends come and Aunt Kitty will make you some cakes and you can have a nice party."

"But this isn't a party, Gran," cried Angela, and explained earnestly that they needed this money for something "very particular-special" and that it wasn't for anything for herself or Michael.

"We want to do good—but's it's a cross-my-bread secret," she said so seriously that her grandmother hugged her suddenly and gave her permission to make a small charge.

"I believe, Kitty," she said to her daughter with shining eyes and a tender smile, "the dear little things are planning this to give me a donation to my 'Poor Children's Outing' Fund."

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Kitty laughed. "More likely for their own outings," she said carelessly, but she promised to make a batch of cakes for the great event, which was fixed for the following Saturday. At Sunday school Angela and Michael so enlarged on the splendours and novelties of the Show that quite a number of children were eager to come and promised to ask if they might.

"I'll come," said Jill Seton, the only child of the Vicar and almost as masterful as Angela, "but I'll only pay threepence. Children always go everywhere half price."

Angela reluctantly conceded this and wished that she had fixed the adult entrance fee at a shilling.

"I'll come," said Henry Dover, a large fat boy with a disposition to bully smaller children, "but I shan't pay a penny. You can't keep me out of the paddock if I want to come in."

"It's our paddock," said Michael hotly, "and Andrew'll be at the gate to stop you."

"Andrew," Henry grinned. "Pooh! As if that kid could stop me and anyhow I shan't

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come in by the gate I can get over the fence.”

“Vulcan’ll chase you and horn you,” threatened Angela.

But everyone knew Vulcan and how gentle and lazy he was, the great, good-natured, lumbering thing, and Henry only laughed.

The Great Show day was perfect as to weather and Angela and Michael were early astir. With some grumbling Miggs had consented to allow Vulcan to be tied up in the shade of the trees where he stood contentedly chewing and switching his tail at the flies, but he would not allow the two cows to be tethered so they kept wandering in and out of the Show ground as suited themselves and were practically useless for show purposes. Michael and Andrew grew hot and tired chasing them back, so Vulcan stood alone under the placard nailed to the tree :

“Three Wild Spannish Bull-fight Bulls.
Beware !”

Miggs rather grumpily consented to allow Andrew the afternoon off, but as for attending the show himself he said he had no time for

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nonsense, and to Angela's tactful suggestion that he donate sixpence to the funds he gave a short laugh and walked off.

Alan had lent a small bell tent and a trestle table had been placed in front of it on which Kitty's cakes were arranged on paper plates with a paper printed by Angela, "For Sail," propped against the middle group.

Michael had been partly bullied and partly cajoled into shaking a shilling out of his money-box and buying penny ice-creams to be sold at a hundred per cent. profit, but it was such hot work running about and arranging everything that the ices disappeared one by one until half an hour before the opening, a very few poor wilted ones remained and by common consent the two Showmen and their assistant consumed these in order to save them.

Punch and Judy were brushed and combed within an inch of their lives ; their manes and tails had been crimped overnight and were plaited with bright ribbons, purloined from Aunt Kitty's odds and ends box. Punch was

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a plebian but useful old draught horse, but there was a tradition in the family that Judy was allied to aristocracy and had race-horse connections. She was a pretty little roan with an arched neck though she was growing old and spavined and long in the tooth.

Polly, the Talking Parrot, had her cage hung on the branch of a tree. She solemnly walked upside down all over her cage muttering to herself but uttering not an intelligible word. Beside her hung an empty cage which had been meant for Mr. and Mrs. Bantam billed as "The Golden Peasants" but whether the bantams objected to sailing under false colours or merely hated confinement, they had defied all attempts to capture them, and though Angela hated giving in to anything more determined than herself, she had had to abandon the chase at last. The pet lamb with a blue ribbon round its neck was allowed to run free as it never strayed far from the children, and the guinea-pigs were as good as gold, appearing quite indifferent to their label,

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which said : " Wild Afrikan Rabits. Do not tuch. These are dangerus."

Pansy, the Performing Pig, was a prize exhibit, being a very clever young boar which had been given to Kitty as a very young piglet with a tightly curled tail and a tender pink nose. He had been named Pansy under a false impression because Angela said his nose was just like a pink pansy, and though he grew big and masculine with a pair of sprouting tusks, the name had stuck. He had been the children's pet since his extreme youth and was devoted to them and as tame as a dog. He was always as clean and white as the pet lamb and a great deal better behaved, and the children had taught him many tricks.

He loved Kitty's little cakes however and the very smell of them was enough to set him snuffling and squealing and rearing on his short hind legs. Michael had to keep a strict watch on the table and drove Pansy away so often that at last the pig grew tired of his frustrated attempts and retired sulkily into the

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back of the tent to snooze comfortably until certain events aroused the sleeping tiger in him once again.

At last the time for the Grand Opening Ceremony had arrived, the dramatic effect of which was slightly marred however by the fact that the youthful spectators had gathered outside the fence where they were telling each other in shrill voices that they could see just as well without paying to go in.

“But you can’t get any refreshments if you stay outside,” screamed Angela, omitting to mention that the refreshments were to be paid for, thus deceiving a dozen or so small but calculating innocents. Diamond cut diamond ! On hearing this cry from Angela the group outside excitedly passed this news on one to the other and began undoing the knots in their handkerchiefs where the threepenny bits were tied up.

Andrew was gate-keeper but as he was billed as keeper of the Spannish Bull also, he was dressed in a sort of a toreador costume of red sateen trousers too small for him and a

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bright pink jumper—a cast-off of Kitty's which the moths had got into. He was kept very heated and busy running up and down the fence driving away children who were trying to get over or under it. Angela looked charming in a crêpe-paper ballet costume made by Kitty who had cautioned her niece against undue activity in case her finery came to pieces. Michael had elected to dress simply in his new blue bathing suit of which he was very proud, a scant little garment with criss-cross straps which set off his sturdy brown limbs and flawless torso charmingly.

So the stage was set. Angela in her ruffled paper costume presided over the refreshments while her brother paraded slowly in front of the tent playing his mouth-organ. One of the penniless onlookers beyond the fence had been given free entry to take Andrew's place at the gate while he led out his wild Spanish Bull by the ring in its nose.

Granny, Alan Moffat and Aunt Kitty and one or two friends, having duly paid their entrance fees were strolling about, admiring

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the animals they knew so well under their new and unfamiliar names. The wild Spanish Bull nuzzled his great moist nose and hanging dewlaps into Kitty's hand and Alan Moffat tickled the twitching noses of the dangerous African rabbits with a grass-blade. There seemed to be some altercation going on at the refreshment booth where the youthful spectators had discovered that refreshments had to be paid for.

"You're a big story, Angela Standish!" said Jill Seton severely. "You did so say refreshments were free. I think it's a silly Show and your dress is only made of paper anyhow."

Angela turned a disdainful shoulder on Jill, but the taunt rankled. She had really fancied herself in the Daring Bare-back Riders' Act in a dress of real silk, but Aunt Kitty had persuaded her to wear this silly paper thing. However, it was too late to do anything about it now, for the Bare-back Ride was about to begin. Andrew led up Punch and Judy who should have been prancing and curvetting

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but instead stood stolidly in the heat with sagging knees and that irritating loose droop to the lower lip which made Punch look so imbecile. Michael flung himself across Punch's broad back, where he lay on his stomach flourishing his small brown heels and spreading out his hands while Angela sat astride Judy, face to tail. With shrill strange cries they urged on their fiery steeds who ambled slowly round the paddock twice in mild wonder at the unaccountable freaks of these humans. Even Angela felt the Bare-back Ride to have fallen flat, but hoped by her last effect to achieve something. She was to slide off Judy's tail-end and alighting on her feet to throw kisses to the applauding crowd. Unfortunately Judy resented this arrangement and displaying the first sign of fieriness she had shown she kicked up her heels vigorously. The astonished Angela slid more rapidly than she had intended, her paper frills caught in a thick knot of ribbon on Judy's tail, ran up like a concertina and she landed quite unhurt but without her dainty frock. A shriek of laughter

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went up from the spectators, even from the grown-ups when to their relief they realised that the daring rider was quite sound. Angela blushed furiously standing there in her little silky white petticoat and bloomers but with true showmanship turning this accident to advantage she bowed again and again before disappearing into the tent where her frock was hanging. No one could be quite sure, she thought, that that last scene had not been part of the act.

Andrew was having some difficulty in guarding the refreshment tent.

“Any sign of that fat Dover boy?” asked Angela breathlessly as she came on duty again.

“No,” replied Andrew, “I been keepin’ me eye on the fence. Henery Dover won’t get a-past me.”

Pansy’s act was quite a success. Everyone clapped and laughed with delight when the big white pig stood on his hind legs and pirouetted slowly round to the strains of the mouth-organ, and when he begged like a dog

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for cake and shammed dead at an order. But the time came when Pansy grew tired of showing off and refused to do any more of his tricks and Angela knew it was of no use to argue with him. So Pansy with a cake in his mouth waddled off into the shade to resume his interrupted snooze. At this moment Angela's blue eyes opened wide in amazement and awe, for out of the branches of the tree came strange sounds in a low guttural voice.

“ Pretty Polly ! Pretty Polly ! ”

“ The parrot's talking ! ” cried someone, and there was a rush for the tree. “ Make him say something else, Angela,” said Jill impatiently, “ any parrot can say Pretty Polly.”

Polly was hanging upside down in his ring, swinging vigorously.

“ Go on, talk,” shouted one of the boys, “ say ‘ pretty polly ’ again if you can't say anything else.”

“ Pretty Polly ! Ugly old Polly ! ” came the voice again, and as the children shrieked

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with laughter the voice went on, "Oh crikey ! Pretty Polly ! What a silly old Show."

Angela and Michael stared spellbound at each other, paralysed by surprise. Had Polly gone mad—or was it possible she had been storing these remarks up for the Show ?

"I see his legs," shouted Michael suddenly in wild excitement, and sure enough a stout pair of boyish legs in woollen stockings and heavy shoes were to be seen dangling out of the tree.

"Stop him !" shrieked Angela. "Don't let him down. It's Henry Dover and he hasn't paid his money."

But the other children, greatly amused, were hauling at Henry's legs and thus assisted he dropped heavily out of the tree in a sitting posture and as he landed on a root of the tree he gave a yelp of pain which went some way in consoling the indignant showmen. Nevertheless Angela advanced valiantly. "Pay your money ! Pay your threepennies, Henry Dover, or you can't come in."

"But I'm in," said Henry coolly rising and

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feeling himself tenderly, "and I'm not going to pay for such a rotten old Show as this."

Angela turned deep crimson ; this was adding insult to injury and Michael responded gallantly to the flurry in her blue eye.

"You pay up, Henry Dover !" he shouted, flourishing a pair of sturdy brown fists under Henry's snub nose. But Henry was so much bigger and heavier than Michael that he simply brushed him aside and he sat down heavily amid the laughter of the other children. He was up again in a moment with tears of fury in his eyes and his fists showering blows on Henry's soft fat body and pasty face until Henry, afraid of attracting the attention of the grown-ups who were wandering off towards the gates, suddenly gave in, and said hastily :

"Stop it ! Stop it, you little tick ! I'll pay ! I was only fooling when I said I wouldn't !"

"You'd better !" breathed Angela, who had been only awaiting her opportunity to join the fray as she saw the grown-ups were now leaving the paddock. Dear old Granny

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had just said : “ We may as well go back to the house for a cup of tea. The dear children seem to be enjoying themselves so well, and will be much happier playing together.”

Grudgingly Henry handed over three coppers and then shouldering his way to the table surveyed the eatables with speculative eye. There was home-made lemonade in pickle bottles, in each of which a straw had been placed so that it could be offered at “ a penny a suck ” and watched jealously that the suction did not last too long. Poor Granny would have fainted with horror had she witnessed this communal way of slaking the thirst, but she was happily quite ignorant of it. The small brown cakes with pink icing looked delicious and had had a good sale, but there were still some left and Henry eyed them with a greedy eye.

“ How much the cakes ? ” he demanded.

“ Penny each,” snapped Angela.

“ Pooh ! They’re very little for a penny,” grumbled Henry.

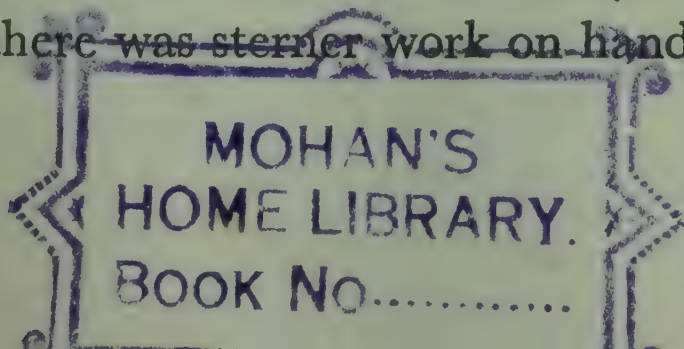
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“ You needn’t have them if you don’t want them.”

After hesitating and inspecting and weighing them in his podgy fists, Henry selected three and popping one whole into his mouth he dropped the other two down the front of his shirt and turned away with a jeering laugh.

“ Michael ! Andrew ! He hasn’t paid ! ” shrilled Angela and both boys rushed to lay hands on Henry. But Henry seeing that no grown-ups were now in sight determined on a bit of bluff and began to cuff the smaller boys right and left until their cheeks and ears were crimson and their heads sang. But still they hung on bravely while the other children gathered round, the boys to cheer, the girls with a half-fearful interest, and even in the midst of her pre-occupation Angela was comforted at seeing such numbers, considering all the threepenny bits they represented.

Soon, she decided, she must seek the young gate-keeper and collect the money, but at present there was sterner work on hand. She



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must help her henchmen and a brilliant idea occurred to her. She aroused Pansy by pulling his ear, which always annoyed him. He lumbered up with an irritated squeal and still holding him by one ear she led him out and up to the three boys struggling on the grass together.

She heard Henry's teasing laugh and something like a sob of rage from Michael and then she gave Pansy a determined push into the centre of the struggling group. Pansy could smell cake through an oven door, and the moment he sniffed that delectable odour he reared up on his hind legs and went straight into the bosom of Henry with a grunt and a squeal of delight. As the pig's questing nose went snuffling into the boy's shirt and his sharp little hoofs began scrabbling there, Henry's face turned sickly pale and he drew back with a cry of fear. Then as Pansy pushed his attentions the boy trod on a root and toppled over backwards. Then the pig saw his golden opportunity. He had abstracted one cake rather the worse for wear and was

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snuffing eagerly after the other when Henry's frenzied yells brought Angela to his side.

"Call your pig off, call the brute off," roared Henry, "he'll gore me to death."

"Will you pay for the cakes then?" demanded Angela.

"Yes! Yes! Let me get up first!"

"Pay first!" struck in Michael sternly, and at a fresh wriggle and grunt from Pansy the wretched Henry put his hand in his pocket and drew forth the money. Michael took it while Angela knelt with her arms locked round Pansy's neck and Henry scrambled up in a towering rage, blundering off across the paddock and breathing threats. But the sight of those delicious cakes going away in the person of Henry Dover was too much for Pansy. With a struggle he freed himself from his little mistress and set off in pursuit of Henry at a brisk gallop, squealing appealingly.

Henry started violently, looked over his shoulder and seeing the pig coming he set off at a run, the children streaming after in

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ecstasies of mirth. Pansy loved a chase for it always meant a tit-bit in the end and so he quickened his scampering run after the racing boy, wriggling his small stiff tail and grunting with pleasure. Henry had by now lost his head and his sense of direction, for instead of making for the gate he found himself galloping downhill into the gully at the bottom of which ran a small creek.

Running, stumbling, breathless, he made a flying leap to clear the creek but landing on a slippery stone his foot slipped and he went souse into the muddy creek-bottom where, looking up, he saw his tormentor come squealing down the hill.

"Oh, Angela, Michael——" he wailed, "call him off—quick, he's coming—he'll rip me——"

"Throw him the other cake then," screamed Angela on the bank, and snatching the crushed remains of it from his bosom the wretched Henry flung it as far as he could towards the greedy pig. Pansy snatched it up with a grunt of joy; then he turned and

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trotted up the hill again. He received a joyous welcome and all the children in a body escorted him back to the refreshment tent and regardless of Angela's attempted defence of the eatables they snatched up the remaining cakes and showered them on the delighted pig.

That night two small figures in pyjamas sat on Angela's bed and reckoned up their spoils. The money taken was just under four shillings, for the deputy-gatekeeper had proved faithless and for a bribe of green apples had deserted the gate and let in the populace. Still, though the takings had not reached Angela's rather optimistic estimate of "about ten pounds," the children regarded fondly the little pile of threepenny bits and pennies and the occasional sixpences.

"There," said Angela with satisfaction, brushing her hair out of her eyes, "next time we go into the township we'll get Aunt Kitty's silk dress and the bangle."

"And don't forget the changing balls," Michael reminded her, sleepily as usual.

It was only after he was asleep that Angela

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remembered that Granny had said that five shillings was not enough to buy the gifts she wished to bestow on her aunt.

“ Well,” she thought rather disconsolately, “ we must just buy one thing—the silk dress or the bangle—I wonder which she’d like best.”

CHAPTER IV

NEARLY A TRAGEDY

THE following day they prevailed upon their aunt to take them into the township, and there after many thinly-veiled hints Kitty announced that she had some shopping to do and that her nephew and niece might wander about as they pleased so long as they got into no mischief. They promised blithely and Kitty gave a sad, wise smile.

“ Well, you shouldn’t get into much harm,” she said, “ but if you are not up to something why are you so anxious to get rid of me ? Oh, I’m not blind, dear kids ! ” and with a laugh she strolled away.

“ Come on,” said Angela, “ Quick ! We’ll go to Wellworth’s.”

Wellworth’s was one of those modern omnium

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“No thank you ! My auntie has a hanker-shif,” replied Angela coldly.

She looked searchingly round the shop to see if there was anything which might conceivably take the place of the silk dress, and suddenly her eye lighted on a hat — *the Hat*. Beautiful it was—a deep pink straw with a bright blue rose nestling under the brim and a plaid ribbon twined round the crown fastened with a spray of diamonds at the side. What such an anachronism of a hat was doing in a modern shop at this period of the world’s history it would be hard to say but Angela loved it the moment she set eyes on it. She saw her Aunt Kitty in that hat, its deep rosy straw nestling on her brown waves of hair, the sky-blue rose shining softly over one ear, the plaid ribbon and the glittering brooch adding their gay notes of colour to the delicious ensemble.

“How—how much is that hat ? ” she asked, faltering for fear it might not be possible to purchase such a lovely thing.

“Well, it’s marked down for the sale,”

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replied the girl, examining the ticket dangling from its silk interior. "Lovely, isn't it? Three-and-sixpence sale price!"

Three and sixpence! It seemed like a miracle; they could buy the hat and have enough for changing balls as well.

"I'll—I'll buy that hat," said Angela, and her voice trembled with feeling while her cheeks were a soft, deep pink. "Isn't it a beauty, Michael?"

Michael was quite cold about the hat. He seemed to be blind to its superlative charms and said rather glumly that it was a pity to waste so much money on a hat when Aunt Kitty already had "tons of hats."

But the hat was purchased. "Shall we send it?" asked the girl.

"Oh, no!" answered Angela in almost a shocked tone; to be robbed of the pleasure of carrying that hat was too much. So the hat was put into a paper bag with the name "Wellworth's" written in block letters across it and the children left the shop. A few minutes later, with sticky hands and faces and

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cheeks bulging with changing balls, they met Aunt Kitty and who should be with her but “Uncle Alan” !

“Why, you dirty little grubs !” cried their aunt. “What on earth have you got there, Angel ? Alan, I positively must take them away and clean them up.”

“But you promised to have lunch with me,” protested Alan.

“But the children ?”

“Well, I’ll wait while you give them the once-over. It shouldn’t take more than half an hour. Like a spot of lunch, Michael ?”

“Rather !” replied Michael heartily.

“What’ll we have for lunch.”

“Whatever you like.”

“Oo, scrummy !”

“Ice-cream for me !” said Angela, rather indistinctly on account of the bulge in her cheek.

“An’ meat pie,” said Michael, “an’ mince tarts an’——”

“Enough ! Enough !” cried Aunt Kitty and whisked them away before they could

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arrange any more excesses. While washing hands and faces and specially stipulating they were not to take "those disgusting changing sweets out of their mouths," she noticed Angela's hat-bag.

"What on earth have you there, Angel? A hat-bag!"

"It's a secret. You mustn't ask!" returned Angela importantly. "By-m-by I'll tell you. Don't you tell, Michael."

But during lunch Angela could not refrain from peeping into the bag, even neglecting her favourite strawberry ice to gaze ecstatically at the hat.

"Angela—what are you doing?"

"N-nothing, Aunt Kitty!"

"What is in that ridiculous bag?"

"It isn't ridicklish. It's something lovely."

At last Michael could no longer stand this foolish mystery and said scornfully: "It's a hat, Aunt Kitty—a hat for you—for your prize—a silly kind of prize——"

"A hat—for me?" gasped Kitty faintly, immediately fearing the worst. She knew

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exactly what a hat bought at Wellworth's bargain counters signified. Angela turned a deep annoyed pink almost as vivid as the hat but not quite. Nothing was quite so pink as that hat. She glared at her brother, speechless for the moment. To have her treasured secret thus torn from her was maddening. For a moment it looked as if she might burst into tears or throw her plate of ice-cream at Michael.

Kitty, looking at her niece anxiously, saw the fluttering red and white signals in her cheeks, the stormy brightening of her blue eyes and compunction seized her. Poor little thing ! Poor dear little Angel—she had meant to give her aunt a lovely surprise and that wretched boy had ruined it for her. So simulating a breathless enthusiasm she cried : “ Oh, Angel ! How lovely ! A hat for me ! I must see it ! But not until we get home,” she added hastily as Angela, beaming once more, began to produce the hat.

“ Oh, yes, Aunt Kitty—now ! ” she said, “ I didn't mean you to see it yet but Michael was a sneak and telled——”

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“Told,” said Michael and received a kick on the ankle.

“Take off that old hat you’re wearing,” pursued Angela with a disparaging glance at the smart little saucer of straw and ribbon which graced Kitty’s pretty head, “and I’ll put it in the bag and you wear this one and give Granny a surprise.”

Kitty stared with glazing eyes and working throat at the rose-pink hat. It was a greater horror even than she had feared. She gave an almost frightened glance at Alan who was grinning mischievously.

“We certainly will surprise Granny,” he murmured. “A beautiful hat, I call that.”

“Isn’t it lovely?” Angela was fondly turning the hat round and round examining its beauties.

“Lo-lovely, dear ! Oh, Alan,” in an undertone, “don’t be a brute ! Think of something or in a moment she’ll be snatching my hat off and making me wear this horror. People are staring already.”

As she feared Angela now pushed back her

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chair and came round to her aunt's side of the table.

"Put it on, Aunt Kitty. There's a mirror there. You will look a pretty lady in it, won't she, Uncle Alan?"

"She'd look a pretty lady in anything," replied Alan gallantly.

"Angela darling," said Kitty hastily, "it's a beautiful hat but—but—people don't change their hats in restaurants. Put it away now and—and—thank you ever so much."

"Part of it's mine," put in Michael jealously, "I was part of the Show, and we bought it with that money but Angela chose the hat. I think it's a silly prize."

"No, it's not!" flared Angela. "You couldn't choose a better one. You wanted to buy Auntie a aeroplane. What good would that be to her? She couldn't wear it to church."

"To church?" gasped Kitty faintly, hurriedly thrusting the hat into its bag while the children were arguing. "Alan, I see how this will be. That hat will blight my life."

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Alan laughed easily, tapping a cigarette on the ash-tray.

“Here,” he said to the children, producing some pennies, “go and see if you can get anything out of the slot machine in the lounge. And if there isn’t one there,” he added as they ran off eagerly, “there ought to be. Why, Kitty, don’t look so tragic because the kid has bought you a new hat. I thought every woman loved a hat no matter how many she had !”

“But this hat, Alan ! What on earth am I going to do. The Angel-child will see that I wear this hat on every occasion. You heard what she said about church.”

“Don’t be absurd, Kit ! Please yourself. Don’t let those youngsters rule you. She’ll forget all about it in a day or two.”

“You don’t know my Angela,” said Kitty grimly, “short of brutally hurting her feelings and throwing her hat in her face, which I’d hate to do, I’m doomed to be seen with that hideous creation on my head wherever I go.”

“Couldn’t something happen to it ?” sug-

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gested Alan helpfully. "Some accident. I could sit on it, for instance, and crush it out of all semblance to a hat."

"No chance! She's taken it with her." Kitty shook her head: "She won't trust it out of her sight. But you've given me an idea, Alan. Something must happen to that hat and right speedily."

"Give it to the waitress," suggested Alan, but Kitty favoured him with a glance of scorn.

"No self-respecting waitress would be seen dead in it, and if I left it in the cloak-room the attendant would be sent hurrying after me with it and I'd have to give her a tip for her thoughtfulness. Oh, oh! I know what I'll do."

She began to dimple and smile mischievously like Angela herself when about to deliver one of her brilliant ideas.

"What?" Alan glanced at her admiringly. "You look stunningly pretty all lit up like that—and your eyes in a sort of blue blaze like the kid's——"

"Stop, Alan! I've got an idea. We'll drive

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home by the river road and I'll suggest getting out there and insist on wearing my new hat. There's always a bit of a breeze down by the river and puff!—away goes my beautiful hat. What do you think of it? ”

“ Low cunning, I call it ! ” laughed Alan.
“ But go ahead ! I won't expose you.”

“ I must do it in self-defence,” said Kitty.
“ Now—would you take me out to a smart restaurant in a hat like that ? ”

“ I'd take you out anywhere in anything,” declared Alan trying to take her hand under the table.

“ Ssh ! Here come the children.”

Angela and Michael returned declaring that there had been no slot machine though they had looked everywhere and Michael had told the man in charge he must have taken it away because Uncle Alan had said it was there.

“ Yes, they must have removed it,” said Alan brazenly.

“ Low cunning ! ” remarked Kitty, apparently to the teacups.

“ We bought ice-creams with the pennies—

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it was no use wasting them," remarked Angela, as they prepared to leave the restaurant.

Down by the river it was cool and pleasant. Kitty had parked the car by the side of the road and they were loitering along the river-path, watching the water as it sparkled and dimpled along in the sunshine or swirled around the willow-roots.

On Kitty's charming head the rose-pink hat glowed like a sunset. Kitty loathed it, fearing every moment some friend or acquaintance would pass and stare goggle-eyed or hurry on in suffocated mirth. Her hope was to get Angela's attention diverted while she contrived to rid herself of the hat in an apparently natural manner, but Angela was hanging on her arm casting admiring and complacent glances at the hat, speculating on her grandmother's surprise and delight when she saw it.

"Poor old Granny," said Angela commiseratingly, "I 'xpect she'd love to have one like it. I'll buy her one when we have another Show."

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“Angel dear,” said Kitty suddenly, “I’ve left my sunshade in the car and it’s getting warm. Just run up and get it, children !”

“Michael can go. I’ll stay with you, Auntie Kit. You don’t want the sun to fade your new hat, do you ?”

“That’s it,” said Kitty desperately, “but you run up too, dear ; boys are not much good at finding things.”

A true woman, Angela yielded to flattery and ran lightly up the slope to the car at the top. Feeling almost like a criminal Kitty hastily arranged the hat lightly askew on her head and as she had anticipated, the first wandering breeze seized it playfully, snatched it from her head and whisked it down the bank, where it rested trembling on the edge of the water. Above her she heard a heart-broken cry :

“Oh, Aunt Kitty, your lovely hat ! Never mind, I’ll get it !”

Angela came flying down the slope, passed Aunt Kitty like a flash and before she could utter a scream of warning was climbing over

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the steep overhanging bank. With a frantic cry Kitty rushed forward :

“ Angela—dont ! Don't ! ”

But she was too late. There **was** a loud splash, a cry of fear and a little pink figure went struggling down the current of the swift stream.

“ Run—run—Michael——” gasped Kitty, “ stop the first man you see—tell him—a little girl in the river——”

She was slipping off her shoes as she spoke and the next moment she sprang into the water and struck out after the child. She could swim, but was not a great performer in the water and soon felt the weight of her clothes impeding her progress. It was very different, she realised, to swim in fresh water hampered by clothing than to swim in the sea in a backless bathing suit. But she struggled on and soon the current took her too and whirled her close to the little pink figure which was still feebly beating the water with thrashing legs and arms. With a sob of thankfulness Kitty grasped a handful of the

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pink frock and endeavoured to keep the small white face above the water.

“ Don’t struggle, darling—don’t grab me ! ” she gasped, not even sure whether the child was conscious or heard her words, “ Auntie will save you.”

She tried desperately to steer her way out of the current, but burdened as she was she felt the breath labouring in her lungs with her agony of effort. Her limbs were like lead and she felt her strokes getting more and more feeble and aimless. The inertness of her burden, too, terrified her ; it could not be that already the child was—oh no ! no ! she refused to think of that.

With despairing eyes she saw the green banks slipping past, the drooping willows trailing their slender green fingers in the water as if to mock her efforts to reach them. How tired she was . . . so tired . . . her eyes were closing with weariness . . . her limbs were numb . . . what heaven it would be to cease this struggle and let the cool swift water whirl her on unresisting. . . . But auto-

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matically she still kept up her efforts though from time to time her thoughts would wander until the cold earthy-tasting river-water lapping over her lips brought her to realisation again and she made fresh desperate efforts.

Then—blessed, heavenly, rapturous relief—she heard a cool familiar voice at her ear.

“All right, little girl! I’ve got you both . . . don’t worry but just hang on to the kid.”

A strong supporting arm passed under her breast, and fear and worry left her. How Alan came to be in the water beside her when she had last seen him going into his office in the town, she did not know or care . . . she only knew that everything was all right now.

Alan Moffat had left his work early, remembering that Kitty had said that she and the children would stop on the river-path, and it seemed a pleasant idea that he and Kitty should loiter for awhile under the shady willows watching the flowing water in the afternoon sunlight.

So his new car roared along the miles from the township, as he hoped that she would still

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be by the river. And then as he rounded a bend rather recklessly honking as he came, his heart almost turned over and he wrenched furiously at the wheel, slewing the car round in a last-minute avoidance of a small boy who seemed suddenly to materialise out of nothing and run out into the middle of the road. Angrily Alan shouted at the youngster as he came to a standstill.

“You confounded little idiot, what do you mean by running out like that? Why—good heavens!—it’s Michael——”

He was out of the car in an instant, wild with fear, questioning the boy whose face, smudged with dust and tears, and crimson and sticky with heat was registering some violent emotion his stammering tongue could scarcely tell.

“Aunt—Aunt Kitty—Angela—in the river,” sobbed Michael.

Alan waited for no more ; his face turned a queer patchy white as without a word he bundled Michael into the car and springing in set the car roaring on its way until he saw

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Kitty's old Ford by the roadway. It was the work of a moment to unlace and kick off his shoes, shed his coat and plunge into the river at a point where he could see a struggling patch of colour out in the middle of a sun-blaze on the water.

With a few powerful strokes he overtook the two girls and with strength and skill he steered them to the bank. Kitty, exhausted as she was, managed to struggle out by the help of the willow-branches and even helped to draw Angela to the bank from Moffat's arms.

Then sinking on to the grass she watched in an agony as he sank on to his knees beside the unconscious form of the child and began first aid exercises. A single shivering sob broke from Kitty's lips as Alan gently opened a small hand tightly clenched on a sodden and dripping wreck of a once-gay hat, all its rainbow dyes streaming out of it.

"Don't panic," said Alan steadily working away, "she's all right. Swallowed a few pints of river water but she'll get rid of that in a moment. Ah ! she's coming round."

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Angela's blue eyes opened languidly, closed, opened again, and this time fixed themselves with recognition on her aunt's face.

"Aunt Kitty—you're all wet," said a weak little voice.

"Darling ! Darling !" Kitty fell on her knees. "Oh, darling !" and she bowed her wet face into her hands with a sob.

"Aunt Kitty—I—I was in the water" ; there was a quaver of terror now in the voice, a look of terror in the blue eyes . . . she was remembering.

"All right, kiddie," said Alan soothingly, wrapping her in his coat and lifting her in his strong arms, "we've all been in for a swimming party except that little funk Michael. Come, Kitty-girl, I'm going to take you all home in my car. I'll send someone back for yours."

"Aunt Kitty," whispered Angela as Kitty walked shakily beside Alan holding a small drooping hand in hers, "I—I saved your beautiful hat—didn't I? I hope it isn't spoiled."

"I've—I've got it here," whispered Kitty and conquered a sob, "I'll keep it as long as I live."

CHAPTER V

A MAN AND A TREE

FOR a few days Angela was a rather languid and self-important invalid, enjoying the sensation of being waited on and fussed over by adoring relatives, including Michael, but her natural vigour and joy-in-life could not be kept under for long and she was soon romping about the place as mercurial as ever.

Kitty did not get over the affair so quickly and completely. She had suffered a great shock and she said to Alan: "I—I can't forget it. If anything dreadful had happened to Angel I'd have blamed myself always. I'd never have got over it. Well, anyway, it has taught me the wickedness of trying to deceive poor little innocents."

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“You’re an innocent yourself, Kit!” Alan returned with a smile, though he too had suffered a bad moment when he had seen his darling Kitty struggling with her burden in the swirling current of the treacherous river, but he felt that Kitty was a little morbid over the business now it was all over and endeavoured to chaff her out of it. “I’ll bet,” he said teasingly, “though you’ve gone all remorseful now, that you’re not game to wear that hat after all.”

Kitty laughed a little uncertainly. “Well,” she said, “the tartan ribbon has run into the sky-blue rose and the sky-blue rose has run into the sunset pink straw so that fortunately even Angela thinks it would hardly do to wear to church, but she is saving up her pennies to buy me another exactly like it—a rather alarming prospect, for she has had quite a lot of pennies since she became a heroine of romance. Alan, if you love me do go and buy up Wellworths’ stock of three and six-penny hats.”

Alan laughed. “Wait till it comes time

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for me to buy your hats," he said, "two and fourpence three farthings will be about my limit. And now how about a drive, Kit?—you're still looking a bit peaked with your eyes about two sizes too large."

"I can't go, Alan," she replied, "mother's not too well to-day. If you want to be an angel take the children. A drive will do Angel good and they'll be off my hands for the afternoon."

Alan made a face. "You fuss too much over them, Kit," he said rather discontentedly but Kitty shook her head.

"You don't understand, Alan, how very dear they are to me and how—how—responsible I feel ; now more than ever."

"Nonsense," he said a little irritably, "the kids are nice kids enough but I'm sure it's not good for kids to be always having their claims put foremost."

Kitty stiffened, refusing to smile at his good-humoured grimace.

"You need not take them, Alan, of course, if you would rather not. I can't

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expect you to take any responsibility for them."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense," he said with a friendly grin, "I'll take the cherubs, of course, if you think I'm capable."

"Naturally I wouldn't trust them to you if I didn't know what good care you'd take of them," Kitty nodded brightly. "You're a dear, Alan. They like you, though Angela was a bit conservative at first. They're really quite easy to manage if you appeal to their better feelings."

"Have they any?" Alan asked mockingly. "I'll take 'em but I think you'd better give me time to take out an accident and fire policy first."

"Well," Kitty smiled acknowledgement, "you'll find them down in the garden . . . tidy and clean for the moment, for I've just turned them out spick and span, but it won't last long."

Alan went down to the garden and passing under a thickly foliated tree ; something which seemed like a ton weight fell on him, two

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small but wiry hands closed round his throat and as he struggled and gasped, a hoarse, guttural voice gurgled in his ear :

“Ha ! pale-faced missionary—Big Chief Flying Cloud is on your track.” Alan shook off Big Chief Flying Cloud—otherwise Michael—in pardonable irritation, turned him up and smacked him thoroughly though not ungently just as Angela arrived on the scene and casting herself on her knees grasped him firmly round the ankles and wailed :

“Oh, my noble rexuer—you must save me from the Indians—I am the pale-face captain——”

“Captive,” corrected Michael, rather red and breathless as he escaped from his undignified position. “I say, Uncle Alan, that’s not playing fair. You are the missionary and you should surrender to Flying Cloud.”

“Well, I’d advise Flying Cloud not to fly at me in future,” said Alan rather grimly, feeling the back of his neck, “you nearly broke my neck.”

“That’s nothing ! If it had been real

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Indians you'd have been tied up to something and burned to death——”

“And stuck full of poison arrows,” Angela added ghoulishly. “Now let's play you've come to save me and we'll sneak off through the bushes while Big Chief Flying Cloud tracks us down and shoots us with his bow and arrers. Come on, brave Misshery—I am the Pale-face Squall——”

“The which ? ”

“Squaw,” said Michael irritably, “she will call it squall.”

“Well, if you're the White Squall, Angel-face, I must say you look like it,” remarked Alan.

“The Pale-face Squall—squaw, I mean,” began Angela.

“The Dirty-face Squaw, I should say. I thought your aunt had just given you a wash and a brush-up.”

“Yes,” returned Angela unconcernedly, “but I was too tidy for a captured pale-face so I untidied a bit.”

“Hmn ! It looks like it ! ” Alan regarded

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her curly mop mussed up and stuck full of feathers and leaves, her frock put on back to front and her face streaked with rainbow hues. "What's that you've got on your face?"

"War-paint," she returned, "it's red geranium juice and the yellow stuff out of the lilies."

"But you're a pale-face captive."

"I told her," broke in Michael, who was similarly adorned with colours, "that pale-faces didn't have war-paint, but she would have it on."

"Well, cut away up to the house now and wash all that muck off, and tidy up a bit, but don't bother your aunt or grandmother. I'm going to take you for a drive," he added rather gloomily.

"Oo, corker!" yelled Michael. "Can I drive? Will you teach me to drive? Auntie Kitty has shown me how to work the gears."

"And go fast—fast—faster'n anything!" shrilled Angela.

"I'll work your gears for you, you young

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speed-fiends, if you're not at the paddock-gate in ten minutes. I'll go without you. Fly ! ”

They were back well within the time, reasonably tidy, though their faces had a smudged look and Angela's sock was still in her shoe, but Alan, man-like, did not notice small deficiencies and was satisfied.

“ Hop in ! ” he said.

There was a brief but passionate struggle for the seat next the driver which Michael appeared to win, but as Angela immediately sat down upon him, completely extinguishing him, the decision was doubtful. While muffled protests came from beneath her Alan sat pat, refusing to drive one inch unless Angela “ took a back seat ” in two senses of the word. Making a virtue of necessity the young lady then climbed over into the back seat, contriving with apparent innocence of intention, to kick her brother's hat into the road.

“ Truly,” thought Alan, as Michael jumped out and recovered his hat, “ the female of the species is deadlier than the male.”

“ Drive fast, will you, Uncle Alan, and let

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me honk at all the corners," suggested Michael, but Alan declined.

"Listen, you kids, I'm going to take you out into the country a bit."

"A picnic—a picnic——" shrilled Angela into his ear.

"Oo, yes!" exclaimed Michael. "Auntie gave us a sixpence each. Let's go and buy apples at Mr. Lipman's farm like we did last year."

"And have tea down by the creek," put in Angela excitedly breathing down Alan's neck.

"All right! All right! But don't blow my ear off with your breathing. We'll run into the town, get some provender——"

"What's it like? Nice? We'd rather have sausage rolls, wouldn't we, Mikey?"

"Grub, I mean—food!" explained Alan. "Sausage rolls, if you like——"

"Ice-creams," from Angela.

"Plum cake and cherry tarts——"

"An' bananas and a pine-apple — and lemonade."

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“And chocolates—lots and lots of chocolates——”

“Look here, you kids—don’t tickle the back of my neck, Angel-face, or you’ll have us in the ditch—d’you think I’m going to get into trouble with your Aunt Kitty loading you up with all that kind of rubbish? I’ll ask the woman at the shop to put up a parcel of good wholesome food suitable for children——”

“Oh, we hate wholesome food! Let us choose, Uncle Alan.”

Under Angela’s supervision, assisted by suggestions from Michael, a satisfactory tea was provided at the pastrycook’s and once more they were on the road.

Early in the afternoon they arrived at the pretty little ferny hollow where the creek meandered delightfully in little pattering rushes or still brown stretches through clustered ferns and wild-flowers. It was a favourite picnic spot and Alan parking the car under a shady tree, the children scrambled out and raced shouting down to the creek which they could see gleaming through the trees.

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“Here ! Here ! You, Angel-face, look out. No more duckings,” cried Alan anxiously. “Look after her, Michael.”

But the creek ran shallow and bright over clean, smooth pebbles and pink-stemmed water-weeds, and it was not long before the children were wading delightedly in the clear, cool water. Presently they came racing back for something to eat, and having satisfied their appetite for the time being ran off again to their play, each with something in hand. Replete with sausage-roll and half a mince pie Alan lay under the shady tree, his hat tilted over his eyes, smoking placidly and idly watching his two charges, busy and happy, constructing a dam with smooth water-worn stones and sticks and mud.

“Getting frightfully wet,” he thought drowsily as Michael, carrying a large stone, slipped and sat down splash in the bed of the creek, “but what’s it matter—in this heat ? They’re happy and giving no trouble.”

He lay luxuriously listening to their childish chatter and watching through narrowed eyes

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their interest in their work, thinking he might have spent a Saturday afternoon in a less pleasant fashion.

"If only Kit were here it would be perfect," he thought lazily, and then, lulled by the heat and the prattling water-voices his thoughts grew hazy and very soon he was frankly asleep.

After half an hour or so of dam-building Angela straightened up, passing a wet brown forearm across her flushed little face to clear the curls out of her eyes, while Michael, squatting on the bank, was critically watching the creeping onslaught of the silver water finding out the tiny interstices in his water-wall and crumbling away all his carefully prepared mud-plasters until the stones shifted and rolled aside.

"I don't want to build dams any more," said Angela, "let's go up to Mr. Lipman's farm and get the apples."

"Righto! We'll go and ask Uncle Alan."

But Uncle Alan was asleep and only gave a sleepy grunt when appealed to, a grunt which

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might have meant anything but satisfied the children that they had done their duty. Scrambling up the bank, bare-legged, wet and muddy, but gloriously satisfied with the world and all that in it is, each munching a jam tart, the children made their way to the farm not far distant.

Mrs. Lipman, a very large woman with at least three chins, when she heard that they came from Mrs. Blair's and wanted to buy apples, nodded, though privately she had her suspicions that they were not all they claimed to be. They looked such ragamuffins to be the grandchildren of Mrs. Blair who bought fruit from her every jam season.

"Yes, your Granny gets her fruit from us every year," she said, peering at them out of the sharp little eyes embedded in the quivering red flesh of her enormous cheeks, "but what are you thinking of carrying 'em in?"

"Inside!" replied Angela gravely and Mrs. Lipman laughed shortly.

"I see. You want to eat as you pick."



“ ‘ Look ! A thief ! ’ whispered Angela excitedly . ”

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“Some. But we want to take some home to Aunt Kitty and Granny.”

“We’ve got sixpence each,” Michael volunteered, and Mrs. Lipman’s brow cleared; whether the children were imposters or not, a shilling was a shilling.

“Very well,” she said, “if you only want a few like, you can go down in the orchard and pick up the windfalls . . . as many as you like for the shilling . . . but none off the trees. I’m too busy to go with you and I don’t know where Lipman is. Mind now,” she added warningly, “don’t climb the trees or you’ll spoil the crop. We have trouble enough with thieves in the orchard wasting more than they take away, drat ’em !”

“Real thieves ?” asked Michael, who was a picture fan. “Burglars with jemmies and masks and—and—revolvers——”

“Not that sort,” returned Mrs. Lipman, “but just as troublesome. We keep a dog there at night, but he can’t be under every tree at once. Now I must get back to my jam. Here’s a small sack for the windfalls.”

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They made their way down to the orchard. It was a pleasant place with rows and rows of laden fruit-trees and bee-hives where the bees buzzed busily in and out. On the brown earth lay the windfalls, many of them sound and rosy and enticing looking, some worm-eaten and shrivelled.

The children ran about excitedly from tree to tree, gathering up the fruit, taking a bite here and there, but too intent on getting their bag filled to eat many at the moment.

Suddenly Angela dragged Michael behind a little low-growing apple-tree and whispered excitedly :

“ Look ! A thief ! ”

Peering through the leaves they saw a man with a basket in his hand coming down between the rows of laden trees. He was peering up into the heavily-fruited branches as he came quietly along and it was evident that he believed himself quite alone.

“ Hadn't we better go and tell Mrs. Lipman ? ” muttered Michael in his sister's ear,

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but Angela shook her head. She always thrilled to drama.

“The thief might see us and shoot us down dead,” she whispered, “wait till he begins to steal the apples.”

The thief was now at some distance, with his back towards them, but they could see him very plainly as he stopped under a well-laden pear-tree. It was a tall tree with a smooth trunk from which all the lower limbs had been lopped away to a height of about ten feet. There was a ladder leaning against the trunk of the tree and the man, who was a big and heavy man, began to climb this rather slowly with little grunts in his breathing. Presently he was lost to sight in the lower branches but his basket could be seen hanging on a limb and as the fascinated children watched they could see that the russet-skinned fruit with a golden-pink flush which told of perfect condition was being carefully plucked and placed in the basket.

Angela thought wistfully of her small white teeth meeting in the firm sweet flesh of a ripe

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pear and this helped to warm her indignation against this thief now quietly helping himself to Mrs. Lipman's pears.

By the time they had run up to tell Mrs Lipman and Mrs. Lipman had found Mr. Lipman, the man would have probably taken all the pears and slipped away. Angela could not bear to think of all Mrs. Lipman's lovely pears going away in the thief's basket and suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to her resourceful little brain.

"Mikey," she whispered, "let's pull away the ladder and then the man can't get down with the pears."

An impish light began to dance in Michael's blue eyes and he grinned.

"Righto ! Don't let him see us. Let's pretend we're stalking wild animals."

Down on hands and knees they crept along behind a screen of gooseberry bushes until they came to the foot of the tree. Then cautiously rising they laid hands on the ladder. It was heavy and they struggled with it, very red in the face and panting a little. Suddenly

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a voice from the depths of the leaves came down to them.

“Here, you young monkeys, what are you doing with that ladder? Stop fooling with it and wait till I come down and I’ll have a word with you.”

It was the voice of the thief and through the screen of leaves they could see a round red face and angry little eyes peering down at them. A ripe pear fell and squashed at Michael’s feet making him jump nervously and the ladder wobbled perilously, but Angela retorted, though with a little catch in her breath :

“No ! If we wait you’ll shoot us with your revolver. You’re a thief taking Mrs. Lipman’s pears and thieves get put in jail——”

“A thief, am I ? ” the man laughed unpleasantly. “And what are you doing in this orchard . . . we’ve found our thieves, have we ? ”

“Yes,” said Angela boldly, “we found you and now we’re going to tell Mrs. Lipman.”

“Well, when I come down to you,” he

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threatened, "you'll know the kind of thief I am."

He began to move cautiously ; the branches shook and there was a drop-drop-dropping of ripe fruit.

"He's coming down !" gasped Michael.
"He'll bring his revolver."

"Quick, Michael—the ladder !"

With a last supreme effort they lifted the ladder clear of the tree ; it swayed perilously in their weak grasp ; the man gave a furious bellow :

"Put that ladder back, you young villains !"

The ladder tipped to one side. "I got to let go !" gasped Angela.

The ladder tore itself out of their hold and crashed to the ground. Its upper end fell on a white bee-hive and overturned it, and in a moment the sunny scented air was a whirling cloud of small, angry, brown buzzing bodies.

"Bees !" yelled Michael, and wildly beating off the disturbed insects they both fled beyond the danger zone. A moving cloud of bees surrounded the pear-tree, buzzing furiously,

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swarming round the trunk and up into the lower branches. The man in the tree was so furious that, regardless of the dropping fruit he was dancing on the branches.

“Come back you—you—come and put that ladder back. Shoo ! Shoo ! Get away, you little devil. Oh ! Oh ! Ouch ! I’m stung !”

“One of the bees has stung him,” remarked Angela calmly.

“Stung,” Michael corrected her perfunctorily. “Oo ! there’s another one,” for a cry of pain came from the tree and a furious beating of the branches ; the basket came hurtling down through the boughs scattering pears as it fell.

“Oh ! Oh !” said the thief in the tree.

“Three !” counted Angela. “We better go now and tell Mrs. Lipman. She can bring her dog and a policeman.”

“Well, come on,” said Michael, but he was a little uneasy, “we’ll get in for a row, I bet !”

“Oh, no !” Angela opened her beautiful eyes innocently. “He’s a thief and you must always catch thieves if you can.”

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This time she felt at least she had done the real, right thing, and that the overturning of the beehive would be thought excusable.

“We better go and tell Uncle Alan,” she said, “case the man goes for us when he gets down. Don’t forget the apples.”

Skirting the tree round which the bees were buzzing angrily, Angela turning up her frock over her curly head made one or two determined dashes and returned with one sting on her bare leg and several juicy pears.

“Ow !” she said, rubbing her leg after plucking out the tiny black barb. “Anyhow I got some pears and Mrs. Lipman said we could have any fruits on the ground,” and then she added to the man in the tree who was roaring at them to put back the ladder, “We can’t put it back ’cos the bees will bite us—sting us, I mean, but we’ll tell Uncle Alan about it.”

With this they went on their way in search of Alan Moffat, happily munching, but on their way across a field they saw the hay made up into fascinating little hay-cocks.

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“What darling little baby haystacks,” exclaimed Angela, “let’s play Gigggleos like in the Picture ‘Frozen North’”

“Igloos,” corrected Michael. “All right, I’ll be an Esquimeau man and you can be an Esquimeau lady and the apples can be blubber and seal-oil.”

They played very happily for a time and the neat little cocks were scattered and rent while the thief in the tree and Uncle Alan down by the creek and Mrs. Lipman at her jam-making were utterly forgotten.

Then a youth came striding down through the lines of hay-cocks furiously demanding what they thought they were up to, ruining his hay. This was young Lipman and he had a light switch in his hand with which he threatened the culprits standing silent and a little uneasy before him.

“I’ve a jolly good mind to give you a hiding,” he said wrathfully.

“You can’t!” asserted Angela, though a little pale. “’Cos we’d tell our Uncle Alan and he’s much bigger’n you. We didn’t know

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it was your hay and besides if it hadn't been for us you wouldn't have caught that thief."

"What thief?"

"The one what's been stealing your apples and pears," put in Michael.

"By Jimini!—is that chap caught?" cried the youth, the anger dying out of his face at the good news. "Where is he? We've been trying to catch him for weeks."

"He's in the tree," replied Angela.

"The tree?"

"Yes, the pear tree!"

"Oh, you little duffers!" cried the boy disgustedly. "Why didn't you go and tell someone? He'll be miles away by this time."

"Oh no, he wont, 'cos we took away the ladder."

"You did? Good for you!" the youth grinned. "But he'll have got down somehow."

"No, he won't, 'cos the bees won't let him."

"What bees?"

"The hive got upset!"

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“ I see ! I bet you had a hand in that. And then—what happened ? ”

“ They flied into the tree——”

“ Flew,” said Michael.

“ Flew,” echoed Angela, “ and stinged——”

“ Stung,” said Michael.

“ Stung him like anything—all his legs and things—and they’re there yet.”

“ Oh crikey ! ” yelled the youth delightedly. “ That’s good ! That’ll learn the beggar not to take our fruit. Well, kids, I was going to give you what-for for spoiling my hay but you’ve done good work treeing that thief so I’ll have to let you off. But you’ll have to come along with me to see if you’re not telling lies. How do I know you’re not the thieves yourselves. There’s lots of apple-cores about here.”

“ Mrs. Lipman said we could have any we found on the ground and we paid a shilling.”

“ Come along now. No giving me the slip,” said young Lipman, and laid a heavy hand on each child’s shoulder so that unwillingly they accompanied him back to the

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orchard, which they were not at all anxious to revisit.

Meanwhile, refreshed by his nap, Alan Moffat awoke, lazily conscious of a flash of sunlight in his eyes stealing through the overhanging branches. He stretched and yawned luxuriously and listened contentedly for a few moments to the gentle busy prattle of the stream. How still everything was save for these gentle subdued sounds of nature. Then with a sudden exclamation he sat up broad awake. There was something in the subdued sounds of nature he missed . . . the children's voices.

When he dropped off for a few minutes, as he supposed he must have done, the children were chattering like starlings together, but now there was no sign or sound of them. Where had they gone? What were they up to? That girl Angela was capable of anything, even half-drowning herself again and getting him in wrong with Kitty. Alan rose hastily and trod on his favourite pipe, muttered an angry word, and brushing grass and earth

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off his trouser legs he strode down to the edge of the creek. Small shoes and socks lay on the bank, the only sign of the children to be seen. Alan called again and again, shouting their names and walking up and down agitatedly, like an old hen with a brood of ducklings as he told himself angrily.

"This creek wouldn't drown a kitten," he assured himself, but could not quite smother his uneasiness. Then he remembered the farm where they were to go for apples and he hurried up the bank and across a couple of fields towards the low white farmhouse among the trees. An enormous woman with triple chins answered his knock. She had an enormous cooking spoon in her hand which dripped jam on his trousers as she leaned out to ask what he wanted, and she looked generally heated and annoyed.

Yes, two children had been there who said they came from Mrs. Blair, but she'd had her doubts all along, they had looked so ragamuffin which a real lady like Mrs. Blair would never allow in her grandchildren. If they had

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come merely to steal her fruit, for all they'd given her a shilling, she'd have the law on them or their parents, and every blessed thing had gone wrong to-day, Mr. Lipman was late for his tea which had been stewing this half-hour, and in going to the gate to see if he was coming her jam had "caught" and if he (Alan) was after the young limbs who had come to steal her apples, he'd better go straight down to the orchard where he'd most likely catch them at it, and what children were coming to nowadays what with the pictures and cheeking their parents and all——

Here Mrs. Lipman paused to draw her breath, and in irritably rubbing her hand across her nose, left a trail of jam across her countenance. But hurriedly Alan cut in explaining that the children did indeed belong to Mrs. Blair who was not responsible for their dilapidated appearance, as he was in charge and if she didn't mind he'd cut along now and see what the kids were doing with themselves.

"And if," called Mrs. Lipman after him,

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trying to disentangle the cooking-spoon from her hair, "they've taken so much as an apple off my fruit trees I'll hold you responsible, young man!"

"What a dragon!" thought Alan as he hurried away. As he came into the orchard with its neat rows of trees he was aware of a noise which sounded rather like the vibrating hum of a distant aeroplane, and this noise grew louder as he penetrated farther into the orchard. Then he was startled by another sound, something between a howl and a groan from somewhere overhead. Vaguely disturbed by this sound, which might very well be associated with the children, Alan hurried on and then stood still in astonishment. Out of the very top of a magnificent pear-tree he saw a face appearing, an angry, red face with one eye swollen and half closed.

Alan's first impulse was to come to the foot of the tree to study this phenomenon but as he approached and found the tree surrounded by a buzzing horde of bees, part of which was seemingly attached to a branch of the tree

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in a cone-shaped pendant, he prudently retreated.

“Hi you!” came a voice from the tree, “don’t go away for goodness’ sake. I’ve been up here for hours waiting for someone to come. I’ve howled my head off but they’re all stone deaf on this farm it seems. Just put the ladder up against the tree, will you?” and then as Alan hesitated to plunge into the whirling cloud of bees the voice went on testily, “Huh! You’re not afraid of those darned bees, are you?”

“Rather! Aren’t you?” said Alan promptly.

“Well—er—of course I’m not! I’ve had to do with bees all my life——”

“Then why don’t you come down to the lower branches?”

“What! Come down through a swarm like that? I’m stung already in half a dozen places, but if you’ll put up the ladder I’ll manage to get on it somehow——”

Alan reconnoitred the tree and measured the ladder with his eye. It was lying on the

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ruins of the overturned hive and seemed to be alive with bees.

“ I say,” he said, “ I’ll see what I can do to help, but honestly I don’t care to butt in among all those bees, vicious little devils ! By the way, how did you get into this mess ? ”

The question seemed to infuriate the man so much that he burst into an angry tirade from which Alan gained the impression that he had a grievance against someone or something, and a dim misgiving began to shape itself in his mind.

“ Look here,” he shouted, “ I can’t make head or tail of what you’re saying, but has it anything to do with two kids who were sent to gather apples here ? ”

“ Anything to do with them ? ” roared the man. “ Aren’t I telling you—they did it—they did it—they did it——”

In his agitation and fury he nearly fell out to the tree.

“ Did what ? ” shouted Alan.

“ Took away the ladder, you fool,” choked the man, “ and set the bees on me.”

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A wild desire to laugh seized Alan but he stifled it bravely. In all this he plainly saw the hand of Michael and more especially the hand of the Angel-child.

"Why on earth," he asked, "should they do that?"

"Don't stand there and ask silly questions," stormed the man. "If you're too scared to put up the ladder, clear out and find someone who isn't, and tell him to bring along a couple of tin cans and a bee box——"

"No, but really," began Alan, "these kids are—I mean—I know these kids and——"

"Then you ought to be ashamed to own it," came the heated reply, "for of all the little demons—especially the girl—they're the worst I've seen—ow! that's another sting—they simply came along here, yanked away the ladder and said I was a thief, stealing Mrs. Lipman's fruit——"

"And aren't you?" Alan choked, masking his mirth with difficulty.

"Am I? You idiot—don't you know who I am?"

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“Not an idea!” returned Alan cheerfully.

“I’m Lipman. I own this farm—this orchard—and had come down here to gather some of the early pears for market before they got too ripe for packing when before I know where I am along come these two fiendish little brats, tree me up here, call me a thief, take away the ladder and upset my bee-hive——”

Unable any longer to restrain his mirth Alan burst into shouts of laughter.

“Upon my word,” he gasped apologetically, “I’m—I’m—frightfully sorry . . . I’ll go and find those wretched kids at once and someone to quieten these bees . . . they’re a bit too active for me. They are imps no doubt—the youngsters, I mean—worse than the bees——” and then unable to trust his voice any longer he fled.

Before he had gone far he met a youth in rustic garb firmly grasping the missing children who were squirming sulkily in his clutch.

“There’s Uncle Alan,” shouted Michael. “Uncle Alan—Uncle Alan——”

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“Now you’ll get it,” remarked Angela vindictively, “for making us come along here and not letting us go back to the picnic.”

Alan strode up to them and stood looking down sternly at the little group.

“Well?” he snapped, “what have you to say for yourselves?”

“Are these kids yours?” asked the youth. “They’ve just been telling me a yarn which may be a cock and bull yarn for all I know—about treeing a thief in the orchard——”

“A thief?” said Alan, his voice going weak again.

“We did! We did! Didn’t we, Angie?” shouted Michael.

“Yes, we saw him get up in the tree to steal the pears, so we took away the ladder and upset the bee-hive and it stung—stung—him——”

“D’you know anything about this, Mister?” asked young Lipman, “because it might be true; we’ve had a lot of thieving in the orchard lately, and if these kids have really treed someone as they say, I’ll forget all about

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their ruining my hay and helping themselves to apples and I'll give 'em their fill of fruit."

"Oh, they've treed someone all right!" said Alan. "I've just seen him and I've come away to get help to drive off the bees."

Young Lipman grinned broadly. "I wouldn't be in a hurry to do that either," he said, "I know these bees; they're savage little brutes and a few stings where he'll feel 'em most will teach Mister Thief to keep out of our orchard. Guess I'll leave him there for a bit. Bees won't settle for hours."

"I don't think," said Alan in a carefully controlled voice, "I'd leave him too long. It mightn't be good for your own health."

"Why, how's that?" the youth smiled cockily.

"Well, the man in the tree happens to be your father," said Alan dryly.

"What! Dad—the old man—treed—in his own orchard?" yelled the youth, and if Alan had expected any filial shock at the plight of his parent, Alan was disappointed. Releasing the children the young man, slap-

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ping his knees alternately, went off into yells of mirthful laughter.

“ Oh, jimini ! Oh, my crikey ! ” he gasped, mopping his eyes. “ If this isn’t the best joke I’ve heard for years. Dad—in the pear tree—and the bees——” and he was off again, spluttering and shaking with enjoyment.

“ Well,” said Alan, “ I can see how much this affects you, poor fellow !—but hadn’t you better do something about it ? Your father suggests tin cans and a bee box. Come on, you two,” he added to the children, “ if there’s trouble anywhere around you’ll blunder into it.”

Taking Angela’s hand and grasping Michael’s arm above the elbow he steered them towards the gate of the orchard but they had not gone far before young Lipman came running after them.

“ I say,” he said, with difficulty keeping his voice steady, “ give me the address of these kids and I’ll send ’em some fruit along later. They’ve earned it in my opinion.”

CHAPTER VI

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

THAT evening an impatient young man waited on the creeper-veiled porch of Mrs. Blair's house, composing improving little lectures in his mind. Within the house Kitty was putting the children to bed. He could hear the talk and laughter and endless demands of the small fry and Kitty's patient and cheerful acquiescence.

"Makes a slave of herself to them," muttered Alan, "it's perfectly absurd!"

At last the children, bathed and brushed and anointed as to sunburn and bee-stings—imaginary on Michael's part, at least—were safely in bed. Kitty had called a cheery good-night for the last time of asking, as she said, having been called back on half a dozen

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pretexts, and coming out silently on to the verandah passed her hand gently over Alan's crisp dark hair.

"Poor old boy! Your turn now!" she said. "You've been a brick, Alan," and she laid her soft cheek against his. "Why, you feel hot, dear!"

He stirred and wished she had not been quite so sweet; it made it more difficult to deliver that improving lecture. Gently he freed himself and said, "Yes, I've a bit of a head—touch of the sun to-day, I suppose—hunting for the kids."

This was perhaps as good an opening as any other, he thought, and Kitty responded: "Yes, I am sorry they were such a nuisance to you, but you have to admit, dear, it's not all naughtiness. The poor dears honestly thought they were doing the Lipmans a good turn in treeing a thief; it was just unfortunate that the thief turned out to be Mr. Lipman, and the upsetting of the hive was pure accident. I'm sure Mr. Lipman would have been touched if he'd heard dear little Angel asking

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in her prayers to-night that his bee-stings should get better."

"Hmn!" said Alan, lighting a cigarette with careful slowness, "I think the only way that Mr. Lipman would be touched in regard to Angel-face would be for him to be at one end of a switch and she at the other. If you had only heard how earnestly he wished he was the little darlings' father for about ten minutes! He thought he could get his business done in that time."

Kitty laughed a little constrainedly, clasping her hands round her knees as she said: "Oh, I know she must seem tiresome to strangers who don't know her, but she has a good heart."

"She has a good nerve," put in Alan, shortly.

"Now, Alan, you must admit in all the mischief they've been in lately there's been a good motive at the back of it——"

"There was a good motive, I suppose, in their sneaking away this afternoon just because I wasn't noticing for the moment——"

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“ Yes, indeed ! Angel said you looked so tired they didn’t want to wake you up when they found you asleep.”

“ I wasn’t asleep—only—only——”

“ Oh no, that goes without saying. No one ever is asleep, I notice, but they thought you were—it seems you were in a trance or something for you didn’t notice them go, and as I say it was kindness on their part not to wake you up. Then at the Show when they made all that upset it was just affection for me made them change the tickets . . . and look how they spent all their money on that awful hat . . . and Angel almost drowned herself to save it for me . . . and the day you brought the strawberries how we all misjudged the child . . . you remember ? ”

Alan remembered. He had arrived one afternoon with some strawberries and they had tea out on the lawn where he had found Mrs. Blair and Kitty and Angela, the latter unusually quiet and spick and span, looking at a book.

“ Hulloa, where’s the lad ? ” enquired Alan

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while Angela gave him a saintly upward look from guileless blue eyes.

“Michael is in disgrace,” said Mrs. Blair with a regretful sigh, “and Kitty—who is a martinet—has sent him to bed.”

“Really, Mother,” expostulated Kitty as she began pouring the tea, “you yourself were very upset at the way he treated poor old Polly . . . he took the parrot out of her cage, tied her by the leg to the currant-bush and deliberately shot her tail-feathers out with his bow and arrows——”

“No! No! Not deliberately, Kitty,” interrupted her mother, “no one was more astonished than the boy when he hit the bird. He’d no idea he was such a good shot.”

“That wasn’t much consolation to Polly,” said Kitty severely, “her pride is bitterly hurt as well as her tail. She keeps looking at the place where her tail should be. It’s very pathetic.”

“Michael says if Polly hadn’t of moved her tail in the way he would not have shot it.” put in Angela.

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“And what was Angel-face’s part in this affair?” asked Alan.

“Oh, for once blameless!” replied her aunt, “and she’s been disgustingly smug ever since, with the consciously virtuous airs of a Sunday school child who has won the Good Conduct prize.”

“Well, you need not throw the child’s good behaviour in her face,” Mrs. Blair reproved her daughter: “There’s no pleasing Kitty, Alan—she seems equally annoyed at Michael’s naughtiness and Angela’s goodness.”

Kitty laughed: “Well, let’s drop the subject,” she said, “and have some strawberries,” and she began to spoon out the luscious red berries into little green plates.

“Michael will be sorry to miss the strawberries,” remarked Angela. “He loves them.”

“Well, don’t gloat,” said Kitty sharply, “it may be your turn to go without next time.”

Mrs. Blair said with almost a coaxing air:

“Don’t you think, Kitty, that the poor boy has been punished enough?”

“Now Mother,” Kitty returned briskly,

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“don’t let’s weaken. It’s absurd to put Michael to bed for cruelty to a poor bird and then feed him on strawberries——”

“But he didn’t know the strawberries were coming,” remarked Angela with her mouth full.

“No !” Kitty’s lip twitched and Alan laughed outright. “He didn’t and perhaps the loss of them may be a lesson to him.”

But somehow no one except Angela seemed to enjoy their strawberries and when tea was over about a dozen fine large berries lay untouched on the glass dish.

“Granny,” said Angela, eyeing them very hard, “do you want the rest of the strawberries ?”

“No thank you, my dear !”

“Aunt Kitty—are you going to have them ?”

“No, I’m not !”

“Well, is Uncle Alan ?”

“Not for me !”

Alan was lying on the grass, smoking a cigarette and tickling Kitty’s bare arm with a blade of grass.

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“Then,” began Angela, “could I——”

“No !” snapped Kitty decisively. “You could not,” and Angela subsided with an injured air and a mutinous little pout.

“I must be getting along, Kit,” Alan said after a time. “I’ve to see a chap on business. Walk down the paddock with me. Good-bye, Mrs. Blair—Bye-bye Angel face !”

When Kitty returned her mother was nodding over her knitting, Angela was nowhere to be seen, and the glass dish on the little rustic table was empty.

“Well ! ! !” exclaimed Kitty, so loudly and vexedly that her mother woke with a start.

“What is it, my dear ?”

“Mother, while I’ve been away and you’ve been asleep that wretched little pig Angela has eaten the last of the strawberries——”

“Oh, the naughty, greedy little puss !” Mrs. Blair’s tone was just as vexed as Kitty’s.

Sternly Kitty called her niece, who came at last looking self-conscious and uneasy. “You took those strawberries, Angela ?”

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Angela wriggled. "Aunt Kitty—yes—but I——"

"I don't want any excuses. You're a bad, greedy child, and I'm disgusted with you. Go away ! Go away ! I don't want to hear a word from you."

She turned her back on the small culprit, remarking to her mother. "If there's one thing I do detest it's a greedy child . . . always thinking of stuffing itself no matter who may go without."

"Granny !" began Angela ; she rarely cried but now her blue eyes looked suspiciously hazy, but her grandmother, usually her unfailing ally, turned away in displeasure : "No, Angela—I don't want to hear anything about it . . . you're a nasty, greedy little girl !"

Angela's blue eyes flashed the tears away and without a word she ran off.

"I think," said Kitty after a moment's uncomfortable silence, "I'll let Michael get up for the rest of the evening."

"Do, my dear," said her mother heartily, "I'm sure he's sorry."

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“And to-morrow,” went on Kitty recklessly, “I’ll let him have back his bow and arrows, although I did intend to confiscate them for the rest of his stay.”

Together Kitty and her mother proceeded to the house and passing Michael’s window, which was slightly ajar, Kitty paused and stared, her eyes widening. Along the windowsill were ranged a number of little green hulls of vanished strawberries and as they stared, Michael’s small brown hand appeared, depositing yet another remnant on the sill.

Kitty and her mother silently stared into each other’s faces and with one accord went silently away.

“I think,” said Mrs. Blair at last dryly, “we might as well drop pretence Kitty. Since you and I and Angela all intended those strawberries for the same person—we owe the dear child an apology.”

“The darling ” said Kitty enthusiastically, “I’ll hug her to death.”

It was this story of Angela’s disinterested nobility of character which Kitty was about

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to relate for the third or fourth time, when Alan stopped her half laughing, half vexed.

"I know it all," he said, "and how the wronged and insulted heroine was taken into town next day and fed on strawberries *ad lib*, but you and your mother are inclined to excuse every outrageous thing they do on the score of good intentions. I believe if they burned the house over your heads and incinerated you both in your beds, your shades would come back to say that they only did it with the idea of keeping you warm."

"That kind of thing they would never do," said Kitty very coldly, no shadow of a smile breaking the pretty severity of her face, "they never hurt those they love and who love them. But I couldn't expect you to understand."

The Blairs were nothing if they were not loyal, thought Alan, and reflected comfortably, "That's how she'd flare out if anyone attacked me." Aloud he said, "It's this way, dear ; I do think you let those kids monopolise you too

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much . . . in fact sometimes to me they seem unmitigated little nuisances."

He had not meant to say quite so much, but he felt irritable and rather seedy to-night and in the ensuing silence he did not attempt to qualify what he had said. He had a sense of grievance and Kitty did not seem to be aware of it. After a rather lengthy silence she said coldly: "You sound as if you positively disliked the children, Alan, and of course if you dislike the children you dislike me."

"Oh, what a piece of reasoning—just like a woman!" said Alan. "As a matter of fact I don't dislike the little beggars at all. Angel-face is a fascinating little monkey when she chooses and Michael and I are great pals. He's going to be my pilot when we can afford to buy a 'plane."

But Kitty was not to be won over lightly and she said very coolly:

"All the same—you consider them—what was it you said—unmitigated nuisances."

"Well, I said sometimes. You know, Kitty,

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ever since you agreed to—to—do me the honour, etc. . . . I've hardly ever had you alone except when the kids are in bed. Honestly, you know, I don't want Angel-face and Saint Michael tagging round with us all the time . . . and if you do," his sense of injury and irritation growing, "I'm afraid I can't mean to you what you do to me."

"Alan," interrupted Kitty, "all men are selfish, I know, but to want to spoil a child's holiday by always telling it to "clear out" as I've heard you tell our two, is more selfish than anything I've heard."

"Oh, come now, Kitty," protested Alan sharply, "hang it all! You can't say that. I'm sure I've put up with those youngsters ever since——"

"Put up with them?" Kitty repeated in insulted tones. "If that is the way you feel about my nephew and niece it shows me that you thoroughly dislike children and such men had better remain unmarried."

"Oh, this is ridiculous," muttered Alan

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rather sulkily, "making a melodrama out of a couple of mischievous children——"

"No more mischievous than thousands of other children," said Kitty remotely. "The truth is, Alan, like lots of men, you have forgotten you were ever a child yourself and you don't understand children, and yet at the same time you're rather like a spoiled child yourself, wanting all the attention and selfishly blind to other people's preferences."

"Thanks !" said Alan shortly ; his head was throbbing painfully and he could feel the blood creep up under his skin. "By that I suppose you mean that your preferences are for the children's society rather than mine. I must say you've shown it pretty plainly."

He threw away his half-smoked cigarette pettishly and rose to his feet.

"Silence gives consent, I believe," he added as Kitty remained silent, "it's better to know these things before it's too late. Good-night !"

"Good-night !" returned Kitty almost inaudibly and Alan, after hesitating for a

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moment turned away and strode down the path.

At the gate he stopped and thought dazedly :
“ What fools we are ! What are we quarrelling about ? This is the idiotic way lovers work up misunderstandings. Shall I go back ? By Jove ! this has set my head off jumping.”

He stood there so long debating that Kitty, whose heart was beating uncomfortably hard with a sort of angry misery, rose abruptly and went into the house. The uncomfortable conviction that Alan had reason for his complaint made her feel still more angry.

“ If he cared for me more than himself he'd never have gone off like that or spoken in that cold, hard way . . . “ better to know these things before it's too late.” . . . That can only mean one thing—he's glad of the excuse to get out of it.”

And when Alan, who feared a snub and liked no more than the next man to eat humble pie even out of the beloved hand, decided he would go back and “ make up ” he arrived just in time to hear the door slam

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as Kitty went into the house. He thought it was deliberate and flushed angrily as he tramped off again.

“A temper” and “Pig-headed—like that child Angela!” he muttered, and stopped appalled. Was this his Kitty he was calling “pig-headed and bad-tempered”—the girl he had so short a time ago called “sweet” and “the only girl in the world”? Oh well, he told himself stubbornly, women were all alike; they purred like cats when you stroked them or gave them cream and scratched like cats if you turned them off their favourite cushion.

Alan went to bed feeling thoroughly disgruntled and feeling too that here was one more grudge he had against those imps of children. Perhaps though, if he hadn't felt so seedy all the evening with a headache and sore throat he might have laughed off Kitty's little tantrums as he'd done at other times, and kissed her back to reasonableness again. He dozed wretchedly through the night, waking every now and then . . . dully con-

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scious of his miserable headache . . . and thinking of Kitty's little cool satin-smooth palms—how delicious they would feel against his hot brow and heavy eyes. Kitty who hated him. . . .

His temperature, though he did not know it, was over 100 degrees.

Alan had never had a day's illness since he contracted measles at the age of eight, but 'flu is no respecter of persons.

CHAPTER VII

TEARS IN THE NIGHT

MRS. BLAIR watched her daughter with troubled eyes. There was something wrong with Kitty. What was the matter with the girl? How listless and quiet she had been for days now, only if she caught her mother's eyes fixed speculatively upon her, awakening to an unnatural gaiety.

At times she was extravagantly affectionate to the children and at others suddenly peevish and impatient with them. She boxed Michael's ears when he bounced out on her from behind the dairy door and made her spill the milk, and though she made him his favourite pudding for lunch to make up for it, that same afternoon her mother heard her calling the children "unmitigated little nuisances."

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Were the children becoming too much for her? Certainly she was a very busy little person with her care of the poultry, the dairy, the kitchen garden and her household duties. Perhaps the lively, obstreperous pair were getting on Kitty's nerves. But Kitty never had nerves . . . a good outburst of hot temper now and then but no jumpiness or queer brooding moods.

Alan hadn't been here for days, thought Mrs. Blair; there's something wrong, but a mother can do nothing except sympathise and be silent. Oh, these young things—making trouble for themselves—but if only she'd tell me about it, storm a bit or cry, it might all be cleared up, but she says nothing and her little set face defies me to say anything either. Angela, that observant young person asked her grandmother :

“What's the matter with Aunt Kitty?”

“Why do you ask, Angel?”

“Well, she's different. She doesn't laugh much . . . and she won't play ‘Bears in the

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Wood ' or ' Burgulars in the Pantry ' or—or—anything. Is she sick, Granny ? ”

“ Well, not very well, perhaps. But don't bother her, dear ; she'll be better presently.”

“ Hadn't we better send for the doctor—or for Uncle Alan. He might make her better again.”

Mrs. Blair glanced sharply at her granddaughter. How unconsciously intuitive these girl-babes were. Michael would never have hit on that solution of Kitty's problem. She said gently to the little girl :

“ Perhaps we will send for Alan, but say nothing to Aunt Kitty, dear ! ”

And yet she did not quite like to send for Alan. Kitty had her father's quick temper, perhaps a spice of her mother's too, before age and experience had taught her to curb it, and she might fiercely resent any interference, however well-meant.

One evening quite early Kitty said rather abruptly : “ Mother, if you don't mind I'll go to bed. Sorry, darling, not to tuck you in as usual, but I have a foul headache ! ”

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(Kitty who never had a headache) Mrs. Blair looked up quickly :

“ I’m so sorry, dear ! Perhaps for a change you’ll let me come and tuck you in.”

“ No, oh, no ! ” returned Kitty quickly, “ I’ll probably be asleep and—and I don’t want to be awakened. I—can’t get off again,” and she slipped away after a hasty kiss, leaving her mother perturbed and thoughtful. Kitty slept like a healthy child as a rule ; no lying awake and tossing on a rumpled bed and hot pillow for her . . . and yet now she had unconsciously confessed to bad nights.

Mrs. Blair, in dressing-gown and slippers, slipped out of her room later on in the night and stood at Kitty’s half-opened door. She thought she had heard a sound. Ah ! there it was again . . . a deep sigh and then a forlorn little sniff as if it had been cut off in the pillow.

Mrs. Blair entered her daughter’s room . . . the blind was up and the moonlight streamed in and fell across Kitty’s rumpled bed where Kitty sat bolt upright, her pretty

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light-brown hair tumbling about her face.

She looked extraordinarily young and pathetic and Mrs. Blair crossed the room in a little tender rush and put her arms about her daughter. She felt the little sodden ball of a wet handkerchief pressed to the girl's quivering lips and in a yearning ecstasy of maternal love and pity she cried : " My dear little girl—tell Mother ! There is something wrong between you and Alan ? "

" Mother, what in the world are you doing out of bed at this hour ? "

Kitty tried to speak with her usual brisk nonchalance but her voice shook, and the next moment she added defiantly : " You might as well know, Mother, that there is nothing between me and Alan now."

She held up a small ringless hand in the moonlight and her voice rose almost hysterically in her effort to control it ; in the next room Angela, always a light sleeper, stirred and sat up.

" Oh, Kitty ! you've not sent back Alan's ring ? " her mother's voice was distressed and

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Kitty gulped down the lump in her throat as she replied :

“ Not—not yet, but I shall ! ”

“ Kitty, don’t—don’t—dear child ! Some foolish quarrel, I suppose ! Oh, these lovers’ quarrels ! They come and go. Why make yourselves so miserable over some little misunderstanding that a word and a kiss could put right ? ”

“ It—it isn’t the quarrel that matters. We’ve both got tempers. It—it is only that I have realised that—that—Alan and I would never suit each other.”

“ Since when have you known that ? ”

“ Since he was here four nights ago. Why, Mother, Alan hates little children.”

“ Hates little children ! Oh, no, Kitty, I’m sure you’re mistaken. A nice boy like Alan could never hate children.”

“ He does ! ” Kitty wearily pushed away the straying hair from her hot face, “ or at all events he hates our two.”

“ Hates Angela and Michael ? Kitty, I can’t believe that. He’s very good to the

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children. Look at the hours he spent making Michael his model aeroplane—and how good he was to Angel when she fell in the river.”

For a moment Kitty's little tearful face softened and worked piteously, her lips quivered and then she shook her head stubbornly.

“Yes ; he—he was very sweet then but I can see that he was only doing it to impress us both . . . not for any affection towards the children. He says they are an unmitigated nuisance.”

So that was where the resounding phrase had come from ; in the moonlit darkness Mrs. Blair smiled a little but she said gently : “Kitty, be fair ! I think I see the trouble. Alan thinks you give too much time to the children.”

“Yes, he thinks I am robbing him of some of the attention he considers his right to have from me. Oh, men are selfish beasts, Mummy ! ”

Kitty threw herself wearily back on the pillow and Mrs. Blair sighed.

“They are more exacting than women

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perhaps," she admitted, "but, Kitty, do you know I sympathise with Alan to a certain extent. The children are very dear to us but they are under his feet practically all the time and every man thinks it his right to have hours of undisturbed companionship with his sweetheart."

"But they're not to know that, poor darlings! And I can't repulse them. And it's only for a little time. Alan is selfish, Mother!"

"I should call it normal, dear! An engagement is a lovely time, Kitty—and however happy one's after-life is, it is never quite the same. It doesn't do to spoil it. You know I love the children being here, but I'd rather send them home than make you and Alan unhappy. Old Martha is quite capable of looking after them until Nancy's return."

"No! No! I'll not have them sent away but—oh—Mummy—I'm a fool but—but—I am unhappy. I could never marry a man who disliked children."

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Kitty crept into her mother's arms as if she had been a child again.

"You see—you see—if Alan had really cared he wouldn't have let days go by without a word just because we'd had a—a—little bust-up about the children."

Mrs. Blair lightly stroked the girl's hair from her hot forehead ; there was something sweet yet poignant in this self-reliant rather managing little daughter of hers creeping into her mother's arms like a grieving child again.

"Well," she asked, "have you done anything to heal the breach? Have you sent Alan a nice little note saying how silly you both were and asking him to tea?"

"N-no ! I'm not going to be first to make advances. I've got my pride, Mother."

"Pride?" her mother said sadly, "a very uncomfortable prickly thing to hug to one's breast as a substitute for love. Well, I'll leave you now, darling. Try to sleep. I wish I could comfort you but these things must right themselves. Good-night, my pet !"

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Kitty gave her mother a hug and with a forced air of brightness said :

“ Good-night, Mummie ! I’m all right, you know, but it’s a comfort to have got that off my chest. But, you dear old plotter, I forbid you to say a word to Alan Moffat or approach him with a white flag, and the children mustn’t be allowed to suspect they’ve ever been in the way. I’m not going to be a fool any longer. If Alan doesn’t care . . . then far better to know it now. Good-night, angel ! ”

But in spite of her brave words, when her mother had gone, Kitty had a quiet little cry in the darkness, and in the children’s room which opened into Kitty’s, someone else cried.

Angela, who, like her aunt, so rarely cried, having heard every word of the conversation and Kitty’s subdued weeping, drew the bed-clothes over her head to smother those fierce little snorts and gulps of emotion with which she always tried to drive back her tears. A strange wayward little thing capable of a fierce though unexpressed devotion, she wor-

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shipped her Aunt Kitty and was full of loving compassion at her grief. Her little heart was wrung to hear the faint sounds of weeping which told her that her strong, brave, composed Kitty who never cried was only like others after all when hurt beyond endurance.

Yet Angela lay still. Another child would have run to throw loving arms about the neck of the sorrowful one and mingled tears and consolatory kisses with hers, but not Angela. Herself hating to be surprised in the weakness of tears she respected Kitty's hidden grief and lay still, but her thoughts, partly childish, partly strangely mature, were busy.

Aunt Kitty was very unhappy . . . and it was her fault, hers and Michael's, because Alan hated them and they were always in the way. Then they must go home . . . Granny had said she would rather send them home than have Aunt Kitty unhappy. But Aunt Kitty, dear Kitty, had said they should not go home even though she was made unhappy. Still they must go . . . and comforted her decision Angela gradually fell asleep.

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In the morning she told Michael a confused story of Aunt Kitty being very sorrowful and Uncle Alan not wanting them always under his feet and instructed him to tell Granny he wanted to go home.

“ But I don’t want to go home,” objected Michael, “ I don’t tread on Uncle Alan’s feet and we’re going to fly my model plane on Saturday.”

“ But Uncle Alan hates us,” said Angela solemnly.

“ He doesn’t hate me ! ” Michael remarked complacently, “ p’raps he hates you because you’re a girl.”

“ He hates both of us. Aunt Kitty says so. He says we’re a—a—er—miggitated nuisance.”

“ What’s that mean ? ” Michael was faintly impressed at last.

“ It—it means something awful ! ” returned Angela, who never admitted ignorance on any subject to Michael.

She finally prevailed upon her brother to back her up in their request to go home by promising to give him her aviator helmet

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bathing-cap which he had always coveted. Then Granny flatly refused to allow them to go home. For a moment she glanced sharply at Angela . . . was it possible the little monkey had heard anything in the night?—but Angela's blue eyes were guileless and she dismissed the notion.

But she felt hurt. The children had seemed so happy, but children were such changeable little creatures and she supposed they had got tired of country life ; no trams, no shops, no pictures. Perhaps it would be better to let them go, but Kitty would be sure to suspect her of packing them off on account of herself and Alan, and she was in such an uncertain temper these days she did not want to annoy her. So she refused Angela's request to be sent home.

“Certainly not ! Don't be a silly little girl. You've not nearly finished your holiday and I'm sure Michael doesn't want to go home, do you, dear ? ”

“No ! ” said the faithless Michael honestly, and his sister gave him a disgusted stare.

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“Then I won’t give you my aviator’s cap,” she said crossly.

“Oh, Angela, you’ve been trying to bribe Michael to say he wanted to go home,” said her grandmother sadly, and her eyes looked so misty that Angela felt a lump in her throat but only scowled fiercely and ran away when the old lady looked at her sorrowfully and held out her hand. And that night Kitty cried again, and Angela lay awake quivering with love and pity, her curly head buried under the bedclothes, and planned that tomorrow she and Michael would run away. Then Alan would come back and Aunt Kitty would be happy again.

The thought of the long railway journey home alone with no one to see them into the train and load them with a hundred instructions what to do and what not to do, as well as tipping the guard to keep an eye on them, was so exciting that she took her head out of the bedclothes and called Michael cautiously, but the subdued sounds from the next room so affected her that she

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dived back again without attempting to rouse her brother.

Fortunately for Angela's plans the adventure of the affair appealed to Michael and the thought of walking in on old Martha and Jim the gardener unannounced, carelessly saying they had come all that way alone, tickled him immensely.

Aunt Kitty was going to play tennis that afternoon at a neighbouring homestead — “Couldn't get out of it” was the way she described it listlessly to her mother—and Granny always had her afternoon nap, so it would be quite easy to slip away. Kitty had invited the children to accompany her but not very cordially and was rather relieved at their refusal, though she felt guilty at feeling relief, but somehow their innocent chatter and endless questions seemed to get on her nerves since this affair with Alan. She was a little surprised at the warmth of her niece's farewell for she was as a rule a very undemonstrative little thing which often led people to believe that Michael had the more affectionate nature of

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the two. Michael, too, hugged his aunt very hard and assured her that he and Angela would never forget to write to her when they got home and they were going to lick the stamps for themselves. Kitty, not noticing Angela's warning signals to her brother answered absent-mindedly :

“All right, old chap ! There's plenty of time for these cordial last messages. I'll be back by tea-time. Don't disturb Gran and play quietly.”

Then she drove off in the rattling, wheezing old Ford and left them staring at each other with a queer sinking feeling as if they were going to cry, the kind of feeling one might get when gazing on someone you knew you were seeing for the last time. But there was so much to do that they soon forgot their feeling of depression. Michael had first raised an objection that, though they might walk to the station, they would have no money with which to purchase their railway tickets. Angela had disposed of that, however, as she did with every difficulty by reminding him

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that his birthday money was still intact.

It seemed that Angela was determined to wrest away his birthright and Michael was inclined to rebel, but the charm of the thought of travelling alone, marching into the ticket office to buy tickets, thrusting his hand into his breeches pocket for the money like a man, was too much for him and he gave in.

“And think,” said Angela, who had skilfully played her fish, “of what fun it will be to get home when everyone’s thinking we’re miles and miles away.”

Michael agreed it would be fun and they had set about their preparation by hiding their buttered scones at lunch-time in their handkerchiefs and earning from Granny a charge of “gobbling” their food too quickly. They had also an apple each and a small and sticky piece of toffee found in Michael’s pocket and thick with fluff. Their problem of food for the journey was thus settled. Now, the house being very quiet, they tip-toed into the bedroom and dressed in their best. One must look one’s best when travelling. Then

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Michael declared he must go and say good-bye to the animals and they hurried to the two horses in the paddock, the cows, Pansy the Pig, the guinea-pigs and Polly the Parrot whose tail feathers were beginning to sprout but who always received Michael with a mixture of alarm and coldness which secretly grieved him though he professed to find it funny. Just as they were starting, Michael, who had a distinctly sentimental streak in him, remarked, "I'd like to say good-bye to poor old Gran, Angel."

Angela faltered; the thought of going away without the usual good-bye kiss from her dear grandmother really hurt her, but she knew it would be fatal to their chances of getting away. She blinked a slight dimness from her gaze and said hurriedly :

"We'll write good-bye to Granny and send her forty kisses in the letter. Have you got Uncle Alan's letter safe?"

Michael patted the pocket of his jumper and heard the faint crackle within with satisfaction. This letter to Alan Moffat was

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meant to clear up the mystery of their departure and put things quite right between him and Aunt Kitty. It was the first letter they had ever written unaided and they considered it a masterpiece. It said :

DEAR UNKEL ALLEN,—

Please come and see Aunt Kitty. We are not here now she is very miss—misr—sorryf.—sad, I mean—and you need not hate us hoping everybody is well at home and with love and kisses to all

Your loving children

ANGELA AND MICHAEL.

P.S.—Gipsy has two pups please come.

Angela, whose writing was generally acknowledged to be much superior to her brother's had wielded the pen and she had written most carefully with a small pink tongue protruding and quivering sympathetically with every stroke.

“What's that last bit for?” asked Michael looking at the postscript, “Uncle Alan knows about Gipsy's pups.”

“Yes, but you have to put P.S. at the end

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of a letter. Mummy always does and I didn't know anything else to say."

"We'll have to put a stamp on," observed Michael, "or the letter won't go."

Always resourceful Angela carefully skinned a stamp off her last letter from her mother and having licked it industriously was annoyed to find that it only curled at the edges and refused to adhere. Not to be beaten, however, she put a tiny dab of treacle on the back of the stamp and it stuck on beautifully. The letter was posted in the letter box at the gate and by good fortune just before the postman came along to clear it, or Alan would not have received the letter that day.

Now, all being in order, the small adventurers, carrying a tiny luncheon case, in which were packed the two scones, the apples—with a bite out of Michael's—and the toffee as well as a few small odds and ends dear to Michael's heart. It had been a severe wrench to him not to be allowed to take his aeroplane but Angela was firm about this. She was managing her brother nicely, but one thing he

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utterly refused to do, and that was to appoint her the Minister of Finance. His money extracted from his money-box was lying warm in his pocket where from time to time he experienced the thrill of turning it over in his hand and hearing it chink softly.

They knew the general direction of the station but they had never walked the distance and in the heat of the day found it a weary road to travel. Occasionally motor cars whirled past them and dust rose and drifted over the little pedestrians, who were feeling hot and sticky and tired. A lorry drawn by two fine old dappled horses with spangled backs and laden with cream cans came clanking along the road. The driver on his lofty perch looked down on the two midgets trudging in the dust.

“Woa, there!” he pulled on the reins, “Woa—Tiger—Woa Jeff!” and the great docile creatures with their clop-clopping hoofs came to a standstill with their hairy fetlocks deep in dust while the driver shouted down to the children.

TEARS IN THE NIGHT

“ Going far, kids ? Like a lift ? ”

Would they not ? They swarmed up over the wheel with agility and soon were seated proudly on a couple of sacks content and happy.

Childlike they did not say where they were going, and the driver, young and careless, though good-natured, took it for granted that they would know where they wished to get off. So cluck-clucking to his horses and slapping the reins briskly on their broad hind-quarters they were off again with a glorious clank-clank of cans and a clop-clop of hoofs on the stones. The noise was deafening and as they all had to shout to be heard no one heard very much and no one noticed that they had passed the turning to the station. It was enchanting perched up there ; the man let Michael hold the reins for a while and explained to Angela that he would allow her also but that his horses were so shy of young ladies he feared they might run away and upset the lorry. Already feeling peckish Michael insisted on having his lunch-time

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scone, and Angela at the sight of hers could not resist. The apples and toffee followed as a matter of course. So at the beginning of their journey all their wherewithal of food was utterly consumed.

After steady trotting for a mile or two the lorry-driver, seeing his young passengers seemed content to remain with him indefinitely, said :

“ Look here, you kids, you seem to be going a long way for two such nippers. Are you sure this is the way you want to go ? ”

“ We want to go to the station and catch the train,” said Angela, and the lorry-driver whistled in dismay.

“ The station ? We passed it more than a mile back. Why ever didn’t you tell me before ? What time does your train leave ? ”

Angela hadn’t the least idea but to be on the safe side she replied :

“ It leaves in the evening.”

“ Oh,” said the driver in relief, “ you’re catching the evening express. There’ll be time enough for that. Look here—I can’t go back with you ’cos I’ve to deliver these cans

TEARS IN THE NIGHT

at the Creamery, but there's a pal of mine going your way in about half an hour. I'll tell him to keep an eye open for you. Hang about here and he'll pick you up."

With this he drew his horses to a stop again, touched something which shrieked horribly against the wheel and twisting his reins round a steel rod, he alighted and helped the children down. When he drove off, he nodded and smiled, assuring them that his pal would look out for them. The children sat down on the grassy bank and waited.

CHAPTER VIII

ADVENTURE

IT was very still and quiet, a country road on a summer afternoon, dust in the roadway, dust on the hedges ; an inquisitive sparrow hopped close to Michael and an old white horse in a paddock thrust his head through a gap in the hedge.

Michael yawned. "It's a long time," he complained when ten minutes had gone by, "it must be an hour now. I wish we hadn't eaten the scones. I'm hungry."

It seemed a long time that they waited for the lorry-driver's pal, but only a motor car or two and a man on horseback driving a cow with a little calf at foot passed them. The cow was rather wild and excited and when the man shouted to them to keep out of the way,

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the children began to run rather aimlessly along the road. This seemed to excite the cow, which made a vicious sideways sweep of her horns and lunged after them, and the man galloped after cracking his whip.

The children fled in terror down a side road and only when they were sure the cow was not following them did they stop running. They were then quite a long way from the cross-roads where they had been told to wait for the lorry-driver's pal. They decided not to go back in case the vicious cow might still be lurking there. Then Michael discovered to his delight that the roadsides were lined with blackberry brambles thick with rich black clusters of berries.

"Oo—oo—Angel," he shouted. "Black-berries—millions of them."

Angela was no less delighted. Forgetting everything else for the moment they wandered on and on picking and eating until lips and finger-tips were stained purple-black with the rich juices and they could eat no more.

"Oh, Michael, I'm so thirsty," Angela

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complained, pushing her hat back from her flushed face, "and so hot!"

"So'm I! We better go to the station now," said Michael.

Angela agreed, unwilling to admit that she had no idea where to find the station and they trudged on. They found a clear runnel of water in a wayside ditch and there they laved their hot faces and hands and had a drink, feeling a little more refreshed but no nearer their goal.

About four o'clock in the afternoon they entered a village where a few shops, a bowser pump and a church made the centre of a small community of houses with pretty gardens.

"P'raps there's a station here," said Angela, bravely keeping back her tears because she saw that Michael was not far from breaking down. But there seemed to be no station and not a soul in the quiet sunny street as they trudged along.

"Let's buy some buns, Angel," suggested Michael, but afraid now that they would not have enough money to buy their railway

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tickets if they expended it on anything else she coaxed him not to spend any of his precious hoard in case, without it, they never got home. Home was beginning to look very desirable to her now, either with Aunt Kitty and Granny or their own home in the distant town where Mummy and Daddy lived.

A little dog came running along the deserted street. It was a pretty little dog with a tawny coat and a tail like a golden ostrich plume ; it had bright perfectly round black eyes like marbles and a small moist black nose superciliously tilted. In short it was a pedigree Peke and that afternoon, following his bath, during which time he was always free of collar and lead, he had squeezed himself through a hole in the hedge intent on seeing the world and seeking adventure just as Michael and Angel had done. And like them too, he was finding it was not quite so nice as he had imagined it to be. He was feeling hot and tired and rather bewildered and footsore and he was quite glad to meet some of those two-legged creatures who some-

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times rather bored him with their caresses and compliments, but who were on the whole very useful to him.

The little dog ran up to the children, wagging his plummy tail and sniffing vigorously through his tiny cocked-up nose.

“ Oh, what a darling little dog ! ” cried Michael, forgetting his tiredness and hunger. “ Look, Angel, he’s licking my fingers. ”

The dog behaved in a most fascinating manner ; he made little playful rushes at the children, barking in a hoarse throaty way and then off he would rush and the children followed, quite captivated by his beauty and charm. After quite an exciting chase they caught the little dog mainly because, being tired, he threw himself down and rolled on his back with all four paws feebly waving and looked piteous.

“ Isn’t he a beauty ? ” cried Michael enthusiastically, “ I’ll keep him for my own. ”

“ He’s half mine, ” said Angela, “ I saw him first. ”

“ You didn’t ! ”

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“ I did ! ”

“ You didn’t ! I called out about him soon as I saw him.”

“ Well, I was going to call out——”

“ Oh well, he can be half yours,” conceded Michael, “ but Angel, s’pose he belongs to someone else.”

“ He doesn’t belong to anyone ’cos he hasn’t got a collar on and Daddy told me dogs without collars never belong to anybody. I’m going to call him Jessie.”

“ No, I want to call him Jack ! ” objected Michael.

“ You can if you like,” returned Angela, superbly indifferent, “ but I’ll call him Jessie.”

They walked on to the end of the village street with the little dog docilely trotting beside them. If he stopped Michael would call “ Here, Jack ! ” and Angela would say, “ Come on, Jessie,” and to either name he most obligingly responded, waving his silken plume and mincing delicately.

Gaining confidence at length he began to lead rather than to follow, trotting on ahead

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with his softly-waving tail caressing his tawny little flanks, sniffing here and there and now and then turning to display his tiny shell-like teeth in a funny little grin.

The children were enchanted with him and all thoughts of catching a train or going home seemed to have faded from their minds. A woman came out of a cottage with a green gate, and as she passed them she glanced sharply at the dog and then at the two children.

“Where did you get that dog?” she asked.

She was a thin little wisp of a woman with a pointed nose and sharp eyes behind glimmering spectacles which seemed to pinch the bridge of her nose. Michael replied with what he believed to be the truth since he had found this collarless and therefore ownerless dog: “He’s mine!” but Angela with well-founded misgiving said quickly, “He’s not your dog.”

“I never said he was mine, Miss Impudence!” snapped the woman, “But he is remarkably like a dog belonging to a lady I know. What do you call him?”

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“Jack,” answered Michael promptly.

“Jessie!” replied Angela just as promptly.

“There! I knew it!” cried the woman triumphantly. “You both call him by a different name. This is Miss Wells’ prize Peke Ching, I’m certain. You bad little things, you deserve that I should tell the police. I’ll take Ching home with me,” and she put out her hand to the little dog. But “Jack” or “Jessie” or “Ching” whatever his name, turned upon her with a vicious little snarl showing all his tiny teeth under his wee absurd nose and she drew back very quickly: “Yes, I’m more than ever certain now,” she said, “he always was a bad-tempered little brute.”

As the dog began to make little growling rushes at her skirts she retreated hurriedly and the Peke ran back to Michael and began to sniff his bare brown legs and dusty sandals with searching affection.

They walked on again but Angela’s confidence was shaken and she said to Michael. “P’raps he does belong to that lady.”

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“ Oh, no ! ” exclaimed Michael. “ He’s mine, Angel. Look how he follows me.”

“ But the lady said she’d tell the policeman and you don’t want to be put in prison, do you ? ”

“ N-no ! ” faltered Michael, looking scared.

“ Then we’d better let Jessie go,” decided Angela regretfully.

“ Good—good-bye, Jack ! ” murmured Michael with a shaking lip ; he had loved that little dog.

With a final stroke of the dear sheeny head of the friendly little creature they both walked away, but the dog refused to be got rid of in that cool fashion ; he simply trotted after them and when they quickened their paces so as to try too high the pattering efforts of his short legs he sat down and yapped piteously and they had to go back to console him. Angela began to look flustered ; it was useless to run round corners or hide in gateways for the little dog invariably found them. He would come pattering along in a great hurry, his exaggerated tail almost overbalancing his

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slim body, sniffing prodigiously. He always ran them to earth and with great joy would fawn upon them and Michael would hug him fondly.

“I believe you’re glad, Michael,” Angela accused him.

“No, I’m not—least I can’t help being a little bit glad,” he would say penitently and would give the dog another surreptitious squeeze.

Angela was worried; she scarcely knew what to do. The dog refused to be abandoned and according to the sharp-nosed stranger they were in danger of the police if they did not get rid of him. Then one of her brilliant ideas occurred to her. They would take the little dog back to the spot where they had met the woman and tie him to the green gate so that he might be found and returned to his owner.

“Have you a bit of string, Michael?”

Being a boy of course Michael had a length of string amidst the varied collection in his pocket and Angela tied it round the dog’s

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neck and endeavoured to lead him by it. He objected to this, however, and sitting back on his haunches he whined angrily and succeeded in nearly throttling himself.

“ We must carry him,” said Angela, her fair little face flushed with heat and determination, and at first the Peke who was footsore and weary welcomed this mode of travel and licked the children’s chins with a smooth little pink rag of a tongue. But he soon began to wriggle and whimper or growl peevishly and it was while Angela, scarlet and weary with trying to prevent him leaping out of her arms, was handing him over to Michael for his turn at carrying that they met the sharp-nosed woman again and with her was a companion.

“ There they are, Miss Wells—the children who have stolen your Ching. The little monkeys !—they’re actually carrying him off. Nicely dressed children too ! What can their parents be thinking of ? ”

The two women came hastily towards the almost petrified children :

“ Ching ! Ching ! ” called the newcomer

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and the little dog gave a frantic wriggle, a frenzied little yapping bark and leaped out of Michael's arms. He ran straight to Miss Wells and with squirms and whines of delight he fawned upon her with his little dusty paws and then leaped right up into her arms and nestled there, turning a supercilious stare on her companion.

"It is your Ching, Miss Wells?"

"Of course! Of course it is, Miss Salmon," cried the other joyfully, "and I'm very much obliged to you," and she caressed the little creature as if it had been a child.

Angela clasping Michael's hand was turning away when Ching sprang down from the lady's arms again and ran after his late friends with a bark of inquiry.

"Ching! Ching! come here!" called his mistress and then, "Children, don't run away. You will have to explain to me how you got my Ching."

"He—he followed us. We didn't know he was yours," replied Angela.

"I told you, you wicked little things!"

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said the first woman sharply, "I believe they deliberately stole him, Miss Wells—and the police ought to be told just to give them a good fright."

"He hadn't any collar," said Michael rather desperately, and there was the tiniest quaver in his voice, "and—and—Daddy says if a dog hasn't a collar he doesn't belong to anyone."

"Not quite that," said Miss Wells with half a smile, while Ching's little flickering tongue shot out and licked her hand. "But they're partly right, Miss Salmon . . . a dog is classed as a stray if he has no collar. Ching got away after his bath, naughty little baby-boy," snatching him up again. "Don't wriggle so! Oh, you want to get down? Very well: There!"

Ching ran to the children again and leaping upon them licked their hands affectionately while half timidly they caressed him.

"Because a dog has no collar is no excuse for stealing him," remarked Miss Salmon acidly.

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“ Oh, we won't say they stole him,” protested Ching's owner, “ I'm thankful they found him . . . he might have been run over and killed and that would have broken my heart. They must have been kind to him, for he seems quite fond of them especially the little boy.”

“ If they didn't steal him,” said Miss Salmon, “ why have they tied a bit of string round his neck and tried to carry him in all this heat ? ”

“ Yes, why did you do that ? ” demanded Miss Wells.

“ He wouldn't leave us,” answered Angela, “ and so we were bringing him back here to tie him to this gate.”

“ As if anyone would believe that ! ” said Miss Salmon with a hard little snort of laughter.

“ I believe it,” said Miss Wells quietly, “ I'm sure this little girl is a truthful child or Ching would not be fond of her . . . dogs always know. I'm very glad you found Ching, my dears, though you should have tried to discover who owned him. I have been very upset and

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have offered a reward of ten shillings for his return——”

“You are never going to reward these children for stealing your dog,” exploded Miss Salmon, her sharp-pointed features turning a deep puce colour with annoyance. “Then I’ve been a fool for my trouble,” and she turned away abruptly.

Ching ran after her and tried to bite her heels, at which she turned round and said passionately as Miss Wells called the dog off: “And I’m sure I don’t know why I should have taken any trouble over a nasty, snarly, yapping little beast like your precious Ching. I’ve always hated the Chinese.”

“And perhaps the Chinese return the compliment,” returned Miss Wells with a heightened colour, and then she turned to the wide-eyed children: “What are your names? I don’t seem to have seen you in the village before. What are you doing here alone?”

“We want to catch a train,” replied Angela, “to go home to Auckland. My name is Angela Standish and his is Michael and we’ve

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been staying with Granny and Aunt Kitty——”

“Stop! Stop!” interrupted Miss Wells, “I can’t follow this at all. There’s no railway station for miles. How did you get here? You had better come to my house and tell me all about it. I don’t believe your people can know you are wandering about like this!”

“Was that lady angry ’cos she didn’t get the reward for finding Jack—Ching, I mean,” asked Michael as they went along. “And are we going to get the ten bob—shillings, I mean—’cos we did find him?”

“Certainly not!” returned Miss Wells severely, “Miss Salmon did it out of kindness to me and wants no reward, and I don’t intend to reward you for trying to entice my little dog away. As a thank-offering for getting him back I shall give the ten shillings to some charitable object.”

In a short time the children were settled on the shady verandah of a pleasant white house after washing hands and faces, and were eating delicious small cakes and drinking lemon syrup out of tall, cool glasses.

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Under Miss Wells' searching enquiry Angela frankly described all their adventures since leaving her grandmother's home, though she maintained a discreet silence as to the reason for their departure. Miss Wells was thoroughly shocked.

"You bad children," she exclaimed, "your poor grandmother and aunt will be frantic. Fancy running away like that!"

"We didn't run!" said Michael feebly, while Angela after taking one bite out of a cake put it down slowly, for all its savour seemed to have gone. She began to realise what this escapade might mean to Granny and Aunt Kitty and the realisation hurt.

"Now," said Miss Wells, "I must go straight down to the post-office and send a wire to your grandmother at the address you have given me and your people can send for you. Stay here on the verandah and as Ching is very tired he will stay with you. Yes, oh yes, Michael, you can finish the cakes if Angela does not want another."

Then she hurried away. Michael having



“Miss Wells was thoroughly shocked. ‘You bad children,’ she exclaimed.”

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finished the cakes and drained the lemonade jug lay down on the clean white-scrubbed porch beside Ching who was stretched out at ease sleeping soundly with little grunts and twitches of his fringed paws. Angela sat staring straight in front of her, with angry reluctant tears she was ashamed to shed stinging her eyelids. Poor Angela, the victim of her own good intentions and an indomitable will was realising that she had blundered into trouble again and was seeing the result of it. Poor Granny would awaken from her nap and call them for their usual cup of milk and scone, and when there was no reply, would come in search of them. How she would search through the shrubbery calling, calling, and then go down to the paddock and call again, hobbling painfully on the rough ground because of her rheumatic knee.

And all that time she would be getting more and more distressed and frightened and at last would go to the gate and out along the hot dusty road calling again. There Aunt Kitty, driving back from her tennis, would meet her

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and at first Kitty would be very angry and then she too would be frightened and unhappy as she searched here and there. Perhaps, thought Angela, with melancholy satisfaction though there was a lump in her throat which seemed as if it would burst, they would then get bloodhounds as she had seen in the picture "The Lost Child," and set them on the track of Michael and herself. She shuddered a little at that thought. Bloodhounds were such huge, hideous dogs with hanging jaws and sick-looking eyes. On the whole she thought she would rather they didn't employ bloodhounds. A nice little dog like Ching now—would be fun. She was getting quite interested in her mental pictures when Michael gave a low exclamation and Ching stirred and yawned then rolled over and sat up with a faint growl.

"Angel," whispered Michael, "there's a pleeceman coming in at the gate. Do you think he's after us. That Miss Sardine must have told him."

Angela stared. There was a policeman fumbling with the catch of the front gate and

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she felt a sort of sick twist on her small stomach. She knew very little about policemen or their functions, but she had a general idea that they made things hard for wrongdoers and put them in prison. On the whole, she felt, if you were under suspicion of having tried to steal a dog, they were more to be feared than bloodhounds. She touched her brother on the shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

“We’d better go quick,” she muttered.

“But—but he’ll see us,” whispered Michael, “he’s coming in.”

The policeman was marching up the path now, very big, very capable-looking in his smart blue uniform and gleaming buttons and a white helmet on his head. Ching was standing now with every tawny hair a-bristle and shrill little yaps of rage alternating with muffled growling.

“I’ll stop him coming,” murmured the resourceful Angela, and with the toe of her sandal she gently but firmly pushed the growling Ching down the steps with an

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inciting whisper : “ Go for him, Ching ! Stop him ! ”

It was like a match to tinder to the excitable little Peke. He rushed down the path gurgling with growls and flew at the policeman's legs, fastening sharp needle-pointed teeth in the thick blue cloth of his trouser-leg. Taken by surprise the big, bold, dreadnought policeman behaved like anyone else in the circumstances.

“ Ger-rout, you little brute ! ” he exclaimed, kicking furiously to free his ankle from the small snarling mass of teeth and hair and blood-curdling snarls. Having done so at the expense of a good yard of blue cloth he turned and fled with Ching raging like a small demon at his heels, and just succeeded in slamming the gate in time, leaving the Peke fuming and gurgling and showing his teeth on the other side just as his mistress arrived.

“ Why, what's all this about ? ” she cried. “ Ching, be quiet, sir ! ”

“ What's it all about ? ” shouted the policeman in a towering rage. “ As you left word at the station your dog was lost I was sent up

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here to get particulars and find he isn't lost any longer, more's the pity. Look at my trousers and there's an inch or more of skin off my ankle—someone's got to pay for that. You'll be charged, ma'am, with keeping a dangerous dog."

With that he departed in a fury, and poor Miss Wells, opening the gate, snatched up the "dangerous dog" and scolded him gently :

"Naughty boy ! Naughty little boy !" she chided. "What a lot of names you have been called to-day, darling. Did the great big policeman frighten you ? But you made friends with the nice children, didn't you ? I must go and give them some tea and keep them until their people get my wire and come for them. Angela — Michael — where are you ? "

But there was no reply. The shady porch was empty and Ching snuffing vigorously explored every corner and then looked up into his mistress's face as if to say, "Now what's to be done ? "

CHAPTER IX

MISSING

ALAN MOFFAT had a miserable week. Like most healthy people with their first dose of 'flu he felt as if he were going to die, and thought the busy doctor who paid him one visit, scribbled a prescription and remarking, "Light diet . . . keep warm . . . all right in a day or two," rushed off again, an "off-handed brute who didn't care whether he lived or died."

He complained thus to his landlady, a good-natured creature who undertook to look after him, and she laughed as she measured out his dose.

"'Flu!" she said. "Yes, everyone feels rotten with 'flu for the first day or two."

For days Alan felt so low and feverish that

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though he thought confusedly and somewhat bitterly of Kitty Blair, he was too ill to make the effort to write to her, and as his landlady, though a "good sort" was a great gossip he did not care to entrust any message to her. In any case, he reflected gloomily, he'd probably never get over this, his head throbbed so and his heart was "all over the place," he could not eat and the very sight of his pipe sickened him . . . it was clear that he was in a bad way. Resentment grew against Kitty ; surely all this time not hearing from him, she must know something was wrong. After the way she had spoken to him when they last met, she probably would not care how ill he was. Why ! look how she was neglecting him now . . . neglecting a sick man. He luxuriated in self-pity for a while, refusing to listen to the sane reminder that she didn't know that he was sick.

If she had enquired she would have known, he reasoned, weakly obstinate.

Then one morning he awoke after a sound night's sleep ; his head had ceased to throb

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and he was conscious of a keen pleasure in the smell of frying bacon. When his landlady brought him in a basin of thin porridge and milk he waved it away : “ No thanks ! Not for me ! Didn’t I smell bacon ?—and toast ? Lots of toast, please.”

“ You’re better ! ” she cried. “ Good ! But don’t overdo it ! Not too much toast or bacon——” but she carried away the porridge.

After a good breakfast and a pipe he insisted on getting up as a preliminary to “ getting back on the job,” and asked for shaving water.

Looking in the glass he decided that it was as well that Kitty had not called during the week : “ I look like a sick bushranger ! ” he said.

His landlady was not surprised to see him appear in the kitchen a little later with a dab of sticking plaster on his chin to say apologetically that he thought he’d “ give it another day ” before going back to work.

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“ I think so too,” she said. “ Take it easy for to-day. You’re still a bit shaky.”

Alan mooned about all the morning and ate a very good luncheon, enjoying it in spite of his growing bitterness against Kitty and his endeavours to resist an urge to go in search of her. He was feeling stronger every hour and after a turn in the garden with a pipe he began to consider whether it would mean too much loss of self-respect if he dropped her a line letting her know how ill he had been and casually intimating in a dignified way that he was prepared to re-open negotiations. Then it would be up to Kitty to make the next move. In fairness, he told himself, Kitty should be allowed to know the facts of his illness and given every chance to make amends.

He was turning the terms of this letter over in his mind when a letter was brought to him by his landlady. He looked up eagerly. From Kitty perhaps ! But the woman said as she handed him the letter :

“ Tuppence to pay—unstamped, the post-man says.”

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“ Pah ! what a filthy letter ! ” he exclaimed in disgust, “ there’s some disgusting sticky mess on it—and what a fist, too. Well, I suppose it’s worth tuppence to gratify one’s curiosity.”

He fished two pennies out of his pocket and slit open the dirty-looking letter from which Angela’s treacle-stuck stamp had dropped, fortunately perhaps, as a used stamp on a letter would probably have cost more in penalties than an unstamped missive.

Having read it through, Alan read it again with knitted brows.

“ What on earth does it mean ? ” he muttered. “ Those youngsters are up to something. Anyhow it was jolly mean of Kitty to tell them I hated them, I don’t hate the poor little beggars at all—they’re nice kids, really—but I remember the silly little donkey Kitty pretended I had said so.”

Then he read the letter again and his face softened : “ Aunt Kitty is sad,” he muttered. “ Couldn’t spell ‘ miserable ’ so they made it ‘ sad.’ ”

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He sat for a few minutes twiddling the letter in his fingers after throwing away the soiled envelope and smoking thoughtfully.

"Poor old kid!" he muttered at last; got up and kicking off his slippers put on his street shoes and hat and ran downstairs. The landlady came out of her kitchen in surprise to hear the firm tread in the hall.

"You're never going out the first day up?" she remonstrated.

"I'm going for a little run in the car . . . do me good," he said.

"Yes," she muttered as she went back to her kitchen, "and I bet I know the way you're going for your run. Funny the girl's never been along to enquire or sent him fruit or flowers or anything. Had a tiff, perhaps."

Though Alan still felt rather dizzy in the head and his heart beat in a rather hurried way, he felt better out in the air, and the thought of seeing his "sad" Kitty and making her smile again as he charmed her out

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of her sadness with magnanimous kindness made him feel better still.

At the gate of the Blair's homestead he saw Kitty furiously cranking up the old Ford. As she gave him a curt greeting and preoccupied glance in place of the warm and welcoming smile he had been prepared for, he stiffened his resolution not to "rush into her arms" unless she met him at least half-way, so he said casually :

"Hulloa, Kitty—going out somewhere?"

"Of course," she replied rather shortly. "Oh," she stamped her foot, "this crank will drive me crazy."

"If you want a drive leave that mouldy heap of scrap iron and jump in here," he suggested.

He knew perversely that it was not the most tactful way of suggesting a drive and Kitty's cheeks flamed.

"No thanks," she said, getting into the Ford, which was now spitefully back-firing, its engine making an occasional start with prodigious fuss and throbbing and then dying

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away abruptly. At last, however, it burst into palpitating life with such energy that the whole car trembled.

Kitty gave Alan a triumphant glance and the engine died with a long exhausted splutter. Her face turned scarlet and she looked as if she would burst into tears. Alan grinned but forebore to triumph as he was tempted to do.

"Come, Kitty," he said, "we haven't had a drive together for some time."

"Do you think," she blazed at him, "I'm doing all this for the pleasure of going for a drive? I'm nearly distracted . . ." her voice broke but she steadied it with an effort. "Something has happened to the children. Not, I suppose, that that will interest you."

"Something happened to the children?" he echoed, and then stung by her last words he added sharply, "Don't be ridiculous . . . I had a letter from them, written to-day."

"A letter?" she cried. "Then why on earth didn't you say so? Sitting there wasting time. . . . Give it to me."

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“I haven’t got it here,” he said stiffly, “but I can tell you what was in it. Evidently you were idiotic enough to tell the poor little beggars that I hated them,” and as Kitty’s flaming cheeks confirmed his suspicions he went on curtly to repeat the gist of Angela’s letter to her.

“Poor darlings !” cried Kitty remorsefully. “But still I can’t understand. Where on earth can they be? Mother says it is hours since she has seen them. She’s terribly worried . . .”

“Oh, they won’t be far off. You’d better get in the car and let’s be off.”

Without any further protest Kitty got in beside him and he started the car off at a great pace.

“But—but where are we going?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Where had we better go?”

“I don’t know either,” Kitty’s voice shook hysterically, “but we can’t just rush off anywhere to look for them,” and then in

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irritation born of her anxiety she added, "It's all your fault, Alan, really. If you hadn't objected to my giving my niece and nephew the ordinary attentions of an aunt they'd—they'd—never have been so hurt and gone off like this. Angela's letter proves how wounded they were at the idea of your hating them so."

"And if you," flared Alan, abruptly stopping the car, "had not, just to satisfy your petty spite against me, deliberately hurt those poor little chaps by telling them a 'cock-and-bull' story of my hating them—— Oh, come on . . . don't let's sit wrangling here . . . let's do something about it."

"That's what I'm waiting for," said Kitty coldly, "we won't do much by your trying to get out of your share of the blame."

Without a word Alan jammed down his foot and manipulated his gears so savagely that the car shot away again at furious speed; but a moment later he drew up again.

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“Look here!” he expostulated, “this is ridiculous. We must have some plan. Where do we go from here? We can’t just rush off anywhere——”

“Oh, don’t let’s keep saying the same thing,” snapped Kitty. “Oh, there’s a telegram boy——”

A boy on a bicycle was waving a telegram at them.

“Blair,” he said, and Kitty snatched the wire from him with fingers which shook so that Alan took the paper from her unrebuked and broke it open.

“Oh,” Alan’s tone was one of immense relief, “they’re all right . . . the little monkeys. I told you there was no need to worry . . . the devil looks after his own. Never panic, my dear girl—there’s no need!”

“I might be more sure of that if you allowed me a glimpse of my own telegram,” said Kitty sarcastically.

“Oh, certainly!” Alan handed it over and watched Kitty’s bewildered face as she read it. The wire said :

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Standish children safe and well at 22
Taniwha Road, Matawai. Amanda Wells.

"How on earth," she said feebly, "are the children at Matawai and who is Amanda Wells . . . never heard of her . . ."

"The quicker we start off the sooner we'll know," replied Alan dryly, "and in the meantime the boy had better take this wire on to your mother to put her out of anxiety."

Kitty had often boasted of Alan's thoughtfulness and resourcefulness in a crisis.

"He thinks of everything," she would say, "and is so thoughtful for mother."

But at this time she felt almost exasperated at his virtues and timely reminder of their plain duty and she sat in silence as they drove off. In spite of her intense relief at the good news of the children, puzzling as it was, she was far from feeling happy. She had brooded all the week over Alan's indifference and now when he did appear it was not in the rôle of penitent at all, but curt and hard

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in his manner. Kitty was aware that she had not been at all conciliatory, but she was full of tearing anxiety about the children and she felt that Alan ought to have made more allowances. She felt the tears, partly of relief, and partly of disappointment, sting her eyelids and she turned her head away so that Alan might not see them. Mile after mile the car hummed on smoothly but Alan did not speak. Occasionally she stole a glance at his face ; after all, in spite of everything it was a comfort to have him here beside her, strong and resourceful, and a little relenting tenderness stole into her heart.

She moved nearer to Alan a little reservedly and looked again at him. His face was set and hard, she thought, and surely thinner and paler ; the lovely bronze of his boyish-manly face seemed to have faded and there were dark rings under his eyes. A faint compunction stirred in Kitty ; perhaps he was really frightfully worried about the children and this was his way of showing it, or could he not be feeling well ? Presently if he made the

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least advance at all she would speak in a more friendly manner to him.

But Alan remained silent. He was intensely hurt. He had risen from a sick-bed to come to Kitty's aid and how had he been received? With hostility and unkindness and unjust charges. Still far from normal in health he was feeling the reaction of it all and only by close concentration on his task could he drive at all, and could not allow anything to distract him.

"Alan," said Kitty at last in a small voice, "aren't you—you don't look very well."

"I'm perfectly well, thanks!" Alan returned stiffly and quite untruthfully. It was a bit late now, he thought, for his fiancée to begin to be sympathetic; a fellow had been at death's door practically and she had not even noticed it.

As a matter of fact they were behaving like two children, widening the breach between them with every word and making themselves more and more miserable. Kitty said no more. Nor did Alan. In the late afternoon

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they stopped at 22 Taniwha Road and Alan waited in the car while Kitty went up to the house. A little tawny dog dashed out yapping furiously, followed by an elderly lady who picked him up and gave him a minute pat.

“Quiet, Ching—these are the children’s friends. He is so excited about the children he cannot keep quiet——”

“I am Kitty Blair,” interrupted Kitty, “we had your wire about Michael and Angela and we are so grateful——” her eyes were scanning the verandah and the garden eagerly, her ears were strained for the sound of little voices and she said with sudden impatience, “Where—where are the children? It was surely true,” she added sharply, staring into Miss Wells’ troubled face, “when you said they were safe and well.”

“Yes, it was quite true—then,” replied Miss Wells slowly, “but, oh, Miss Blair—I’m so sorry——”

“Then?” screamed Kitty in a voice so shrill with fear and pain that Alan heard it and came running up the path as she went

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on frantically, " But what can have happened to them since? Tell me—tell me—or you'll drive me mad—and—and stop your dog barking, please ! "

" Nothing dreadful has happened, so far as I know, but—be quiet, Ching darling ; yes, I am sure you know all about it, if you could only speak. You must excuse my little fellow—these little creatures are so highly gifted—only speech has been denied to them. Ching was the last to see the children and it is his way of trying to tell us how they disappeared."

" Disappeared ? " gasped Kitty and she turned so pale that Alan instinctively put out his hand, but she seemed not to see it.

" Please tell us quickly," said Alan, " what you know about the children."

" Unfortunately I know nothing after leaving them here when I went to send your wire. When I returned Ching was barking at a policeman through the gate—who called him a dangerous brute—so absurd with such a scrap, even if he had torn his trousers and he said the skin also, but that would have to be

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proved, though I declined to investigate naturally——”

“ Oh, please go on,” begged Kitty, “ where were the children ? ”

“ Gone ! ” replied Miss Wells, and repeated dramatically, “ Gone ! Yes, darling,” as Ching again burst into frenzied barking, “ you want to tell us all about it. Strange that the policeman in a subsequent statement about his trousers declares that the little girl set the dog on him, but that’s incredible . . . such a nice child with lovely eyes and Ching loved her.”

“ Not incredible at all with Angel-face,” said Alan grimly, and Kitty darted him a look of dislike.

“ Has nothing been done to find them ? ” she asked in a breaking voice.

Unfortunately Miss Wells seemed to have wasted a good deal of time in searching the house and garden and then running rather aimlessly up and down the village street questioning everybody she met. Nobody except Ching, who had twice to be brought away

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from the back gate, seemed to have thought of the possibility of the children having taken the back road. The search began in earnest now, and as it was rapidly growing dark, searchers went out with electric torches and lanterns while wireless stations were broadcasting the description of the missing children. Ching, in a delirium of barking, was telling everyone that he knew all about it only people were too stupid to understand his language.

CHAPTER X

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF MICHAEL AND ANGELA

THE children, when scared away by the majesty of the law which happened to be in temporary difficulties at the moment, ran down the back garden and found a small gate which was tied up by a worn rope. This gate was practically never used and was so tied to indicate to anyone who wished to use it that it must be well secured in case Ching took it into his head to wander, for his mistress had overlooked the small hole in the hedge by which he had escaped that day.

It did not take the children long to climb over the gate, and they found themselves on a quiet grassy road bounded by paddocks which sloped away to a line of bush-clad hills. It was now late in the afternoon and the sun

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was far in the west, casting long cool shadows across the fields. The children hurried along the road in the general direction in which Angela believed their grandmother's home to be.

"It's too far to get home to Daddy's and Mummy's house," she said to Michael, "so we'll have to go back to Granny's."

"D'you know the way?" he asked anxiously, for his short legs were beginning to flag at the pace set by his sister.

"Partly," replied Angela, who never admitted ignorance to her brother. "I expect we'll soon find someone or a motor car will come and take us home."

"D'you think the pleeceman will catch us?" he whispered fearfully.

"No! Pooh! who's scared of an old policeman?" muttered Angela valiantly, but she glanced anxiously over her shoulder from time to time as they trudged on.

No vehicle of any kind overtook them but at last, looking away across the paddocks Angela saw several puffs of steam like balls of

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cotton wool floating above the distant trees while a faint but shrill whistle awoke the echoes in the hills.

"A train," she cried joyfully, "there must be a station near here," and unfortunately she was seized by one of her brilliant inspirations which so often led to disaster.

"Mikey," she said, "we'll go across the paggots——"

"Paddocks," corrected Michael mechanically.

"—and catch the train," went on Angela, "it'll be shorter that way."

So they bundled under the barbed wire fence, Angela leaving a fluttering rag of pink on the lowest strand. They crossed several fields in which sheep or cattle grazed but the mild-eyed curious cows who lifted horned heads to stare inquisitively had no terrors for them, accustomed as they were to the cows on the Blair farmlet. When, however, they climbed over a padlocked gate into an apparently empty paddock and a huge bull emerged from a little patch of shade and stood lowering

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at them out of small sullen red eyes with his tail switching his brindled flanks, it was a different matter. The old bull at home which had posed as the Mad Spanish Bull at their circus never looked at them like that, never made little low grumbling sounds in his throat or pawed at the turf as this one was doing.

“Angel—let’s run!” whispered Michael, “I believe he’s coming after us.”

Angela stood rooted to the spot uncertain what to do. Instinct taught her that to run would probably provoke the bull to follow, and yet they could not stand there waiting to be tossed on those terrible sharp curved horns. The bull decided it for them. After snuffling and snorting and tossing his great heavy head once or twice he started towards them at a lumbering trot. It was probably more curiosity than temper which prompted him to approach the children, but with a shriek of fear they both turned and made for the fence and the huge beast at once quickened his pace. With a strangled roar he came on, head down and tail stiffened, on the heels of the

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small flying figures fleeing in terror from the dull thunder of pursuing hoofs. Fortunately the fence was much nearer to the children than it was to the bull, and with hearts beating suffocatingly, their breath panting between their parted lips both boy and girl reached the fence and heedless of torn garments and scratched arms and legs they got under it somehow and lay exhausted on the other side while the great beast rumbling and grumbling paraded up and down on his side. But even here Angela felt they were far from safe. The bull looked so huge and the fence so slender. So dragging the frightened Michael to his feet they pursued their flight down a long slope to a bush-clad gulley. Michael lost a sandal and Angela had dropped her little luncheon case in the bull's paddock. They reached the foot of the slope dishevelled and weary, panting, half-sobbing, for a tremendous clashing and straining of the wires of the fence under the onslaught of the bull's horns had lent wings to their feet. In imagination they heard the heavy pounding feet, the angry snorting and

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choked bellows of the great beast in pursuit.

Straight in among the cool green shadows of the darkening bush they ran, scrambling through the undergrowth, sinking to the ankles in a tiny runnel of water seeping up through the moss, and pushing on, on into the heart of the forest ways, scratched, breathless, panic-stricken.

In a lovely glade of tall green ferns spreading like giant umbrellas overhead, the children sank down exhausted and, her brave moral shattered at last, Angela burst into the natural tears of childhood while the frightened Michael mingled his lamentations with hers. For a time nothing was heard in that sylvan retreat save the hushed low sweep of the wind in the tree-tops, the hum of myriad winged creatures and the sobs and sniffs of the two poor frightened little humans who had strayed into the wilderness.

At length Angela, ashamed as always at any display of emotion, sat up and with a determined effort conquered her sobs, saying with a pathetic quaver in her voice : “ It’s all

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right, Michael dear ; you needn't cry about it."

The insulted Michael, who had not actually cried until he had seen his brave and usually collected sister give way, raised his head with the tears on his little smudged face arrested by the very heat of his indignation.

"Needn't cry?" he snorted with a gulp and a sniff, "why, you're crying yourself; you cried first."

Angela blushed at this tactless remark and with a pathetic attempt at dignity, she remarked :

"Only a teeny bit. It was that—that bull. I hate bulls. I—I wouldn't have cared a bit if it had been bloodhounds. I wouldn't have cried. I'm—I'm used to bloodhounds."

She went on at random in her anxiety to divert Michael's mind from her lapse into babyish tears, but Michael gave a doleful sniff.

"It's getting so dark," he said fearfully. "Can't we get out of the trees, Angel?"

Darkness was falling. The long golden afternoon had waned and in the bush shadows and gloom gathered thickly, only more marked

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by the long thin pencils of light shot through the thickets by the departing sun. It was growing chilly too ; the moss was damp under the trees and there was another torment never long absent from the semi-tropical bush of New Zealand, the vicious stings of hordes of mosquitoes avid for the sweet warm blood of healthy children. They darted their long thin proboscides into bare legs and arms and warm round cheeks and soft necks until the poor little victims were in a constant flurry of slapping and scratching at the irritating bites, and the sound of newly arriving hordes of insects attracted to the unwonted feast filled the air.

In desperation at last they got up and attempted to find their way out of the bush but their stumbling feet only led them farther and farther astray. Black night in the heart of the bush descended upon them, the close green thickets of trees closed round them like dark armies, the thick rankly-growing vines hung gloomy curtains from tree to tree hanging motionless in the windless calm or crept like

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twisted snakes along the ground to entangle their weary feet while thorny undergrowth snatched at their clothing and tore their hands and faces.

Poor little Babes in the Wood ! Bravely they struggled on, confident that soon they must find the thinner growths of trees which would lead them out into the open. In reality, according to the common habit of people lost in the bush they were walking in circles and actually were never very far away from their point of entry.

But bewildered wanderers in the sombre beautiful aisles of the New Zealand forest have lain down within almost a stone's throw of civilisation and died from exhaustion and exposure and the panic belief that they were in the impenetrable depths of the forest.

At last exhausted nature claimed these two small wanderers and, completely done, they collapsed like Babes in the Wood indeed at the foot of a tall tree, clasping each other close, too weary, too bewildered even for tears. The lancinating insects were few here

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fortunately, though they had left their cruel marks on poor little swollen arms and legs and faces.

“ We’ll get out in the morning, Mikey ! ” Angela whispered bravely, “ it’ll be all right ! ” and Michael having found the remains of one of Miss Wells’ cakes in his pocket they shared it between them and drank a little water from a mossy seepage near at hand. It tasted muddy but was ecstasy to swollen tongues and lips. There was silence for a time save for the solemn hush-hush of the eternally whispering trees, silence and darkness. Michael crept closer to Angela who, with the eternal mother gesture put her arms tightly round him and her cheek to his.

“ I wonder,” said Michael in a small whisper, “ w-what Granny is doing now.”

“ And Auntie Kitty ! ”

“ And—and M-mummy and Daddy ! ”

In their loneliness and desolation merely to repeat these dear familiar names of home was a comfort and seemed to bring home nearer to them like a sweet and homely light shining

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through the dark and dreary night of the forest. Soon Michael's heavy little head slipped a little lower against his sister's shielding arm and his quiet breathing told of merciful sleep. A little longer Angela sat rigid and upright, a tear slid down her flushed and grimy little cheek but she winked the next one away.

Confusedly, wearily, she tried to repeat the prayer she had been taught to say each night in the safe shelter of her pretty bedroom, kneeling beside a little white bed :

“ Now I lay me down to sleep ;
I pray the Lord my soul to keep ;
If I should die before I wake—— ”

Her drowsy murmurs ceased and faltered into silence ; her fringed lids fell over weary blue eyes, her golden head dropped gently against her brother's cheek and now there was utter silence save for the whispering trees.

“ If I should die before I wake ! ”

Ah, little Babes in the Wood—others more

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experienced, stronger, older than you have never roused from the exhausted sleep which now claims you.

Where are your rescuers now? Come soon before it is too late or you may fear to look upon what you will find in the shade of the forest trees.

Great black clouds were massing in the sky and before morning a storm had broken over the countryside, beating down the standing corn, flooding the little rivers, bending and twisting the giant trees, drenching the green thickets of the bush, tearing at them with wild wet hands. But the children slept on . . . too profound their sleep to be awakened by the outside clamour which was heard here in the dark recesses of the bush as no more than broken echoes of the storm, though here and there a tall tree cracked and groaned as some living limb was torn writhing from its body.

Search parties were out all over the countryside, and at hourly intervals the wireless stations broadcast the description of the children. But actually nothing could be done

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until morning ; the night was so dark and storm-ridden it was dangerous to drive or even walk far because of swollen creeks and torn-off branches of trees obstructing the way.

Wet to the skin and utterly nonplussed the searchers came in out of the storm and confessed as much.

Kitty was like a thing distraught, distracted, but still grimly, obstinately determined to go on searching in the face of all difficulties.

“ Oh, my dear,” groaned Miss Wells, who had thrown open her house and all its resources to aid in the search, “ you must rest—you must—we can do nothing till morning——”

“ She’s right, Kitty—you simply must not be obstinate,” said Alan sternly, wrung to the heart to see his poor wilful Kitty so broken but fearing a breakdown if he gave way to sympathetic consolations, “ you’ll go all to pieces if you don’t rest . . . and have something to eat like a sensible girl.”

“ You mean—you actually mean,” flared Kitty too terrified and anguished to be just, “ to suggest that we all go comfortably to

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sleep after a good meal while my poor darlings are out in this storm wandering about terrified—famished—perhaps—— Oh, I won't do it! I won't do it!" She wrung her hands. "None of you really care but me. Why should you? You're all very good, but the children are nothing to you."

She would listen to no comfort, no suggestions; she turned away from Alan and though his heart yearned over her he felt that only if he could produce the children would the breach be healed between them.

Rightly or wrongly she put a large share—if not all—of the blame for their disappearance on him. Somehow the night wore away. Miss Wells had so far prevailed upon Kitty to take a cup of tea and "lie down for a few minutes" and had the comfort of seeing the exhausted girl fall asleep on the sitting-room couch. She covered her with a warm rug and tucked it in tenderly, rejoicing half-guiltily in the fact that she had introduced a small portion of a sleeping draught which she sometimes used herself for insomnia into

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Kitty's tea. She stole away then with the sleepy Ching in her arms. He half roused, growled sleepily and settled down again comfortably.

Alan was staying for the night at the house of one of the voluntary search-party and as he lay awake, listening to the wind and rain sobbing and wailing round the house his heart was heavy.

“Poor little kids ! Where are they now ? How will they weather this if they are out in it ? Oh, poor Kitty ! If only she'd let me comfort her a bit.”

He found it impossible to sleep and at the first streak of daylight was out of bed. His head was throbbing heavily again and hot flushes and shuddering chills seemed to run all over his body. The last sixteen hours had not been the best treatment that a patient just convalescing from a sharp bout of influenza could receive. But in spite of his bodily discomfort he went resolutely out into the cool, clear morning, for the storm had blown itself out and the morning was fine and still.

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He got his car out of the garage and called at Miss Wells' house. She was in dressing gown and curling pins and with a little squawk of dismay she would have retreated only that his weary and haggard face told her that he was utterly unaware of her or her attire. He asked for Kitty but she, it seemed, had gone out earlier with one of the other searchers ; they had gone, Miss Wells said, with a shudder, down to the river. Alan turned away with a pang at his heart, recalling how he had said laughingly to Kitty after Angela's other escapade in the river that "she was evidently not born to be drowned."

As he was going down the path something brushed against his legs and looking down he saw an animated scrap of tawny fur and plummy tail and round marble-like eyes fixed upon his face.

"The cause of the trouble," he thought, "and the little beast looks as if it knows something."

He was about to push aside the sniffing goggle-eyed little creature with his foot when

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a thought occurred to him and stooping he gathered up the little animal and strode down the path with him. Ching made no objection ; he had met so many strangers in the last few hours that he had ceased to resent any of them very actively, always excepting the policeman who had done great work in searching for the children, but who still kept a wary eye on Ching.

Scribbling a hasty line on the back of an envelope assuring Miss Wells of the safety of her pet, Alan thrust it into the letter-box at the gate and deposited Ching in the car. Then he himself got in and drove off. Ching ran up and down the nicely upholstered seat sniffing busily, and exploring everything.

“ Well, my miniature bloodhound, discovered anything ? ” asked Alan. “ I should say Nature must have intended that turned-up nose of yours for something besides expressing contempt.”

Remembering suddenly that Miss Wells had told him that after the departure of the children Ching could hardly be persuaded to

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leave the back gate, Alan determined to take the back road, and on a chance of the little dog being useful, to take him along. Looking from left to right anxiously and driving slowly Alan followed the very route the children had taken the day before, but the heavy rain had obliterated all traces of travel and he was beginning to feel disheartened at the blind uncertainty of this search when his eye caught sight of something.

It was a tiny pink rag fluttering bravely on a barbed-wire fence. Alan got down to examine it but had to admit it might have belonged to any one of a hundred girls. If only Kitty had been with him she could have identified it at once as part of Angela's attire or otherwise. He thrust the pink scrap under Ching's nose but the round marble eyes were unreadable, though the twitching little nose sniffed searchingly as usual. Then Ching turned away indifferently.

"Supercilious brute!" muttered Alan.
"But come on! Hanged if I'm going to give up the chase. Someone with a pink

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frock has been under that fence not so long ago."

Taking Ching under his arm he set off across the paddock and into another paddock beyond, where he set the little dog down as he was growling and restless and after a soft growl or two had sharply nipped Alan's finger.

The little dog capered on ahead, pleased with his freedom, and disappeared in a slight dip, where Alan heard him barking vigorously. Hardly daring to hope that his search was ended Alan hurried after the dog and suddenly saw much too close for his comfort a huge bull at which the tiny Ching, with much more valour than discretion, was barking furiously. The scrap was positively bristling and shaking with mimic fury, all his tiny teeth in evidence and the bull was contemplating him with stupid astonishment. Dogs he knew well enough and hated but he had never seen one of this kind before, and as an elephant is said to be frightened of a mouse, so we may imagine that this great hulking bull was

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uneasy at this vociferous scrap of hair and teeth and fury. Alan, however, did not flatter himself that he would be equally awe-inspiring to the bull and he wished himself anywhere but in that paddock. The bull had not yet seen him but he felt he could not sneak off and leave that valiant atom to its fate. He whistled cautiously and to his relief Ching turned and came galloping back towards him.

But alas ! so did the bull, and snatching up the dog Alan fled for the fence as the children had done the day before. As he reached it he trod on something hidden in the soaked grass and came to his knees but was up again in a moment snatching up the object which had overthrown him. Over the fence he went, hearing clothes rip as he did so, and the bull cheated for the second time, blew and snorted and trotted up and down the wires for some time.

Ching, considerably rumped in his person and his dignity, struggled out from under Alan's not inconsiderable weight and resumed

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his argument with the bull but on the safe side of the fence.

“ Cheers ! ” cried Alan, struggling to his feet and disregarding a rip in the leg of his trousers and deeply muddied knees, for in his hand he held a clue at last, the little battered and water-soaked luncheon case in which, he knew, the children always packed their lunches.

“ Sniff ! Sniff, bloodhound ! ” he shouted like a schoolboy, and this time the dog showed signs of recognition and darted away down the slope nose close to ground. A few minutes later Alan heard him again barking, and when he overtook the dog he found him tugging with teeth and claws at Michael’s buttonless sandal.

“ Get along, little doggie, get along ! ” chanted Alan as excited as a boy and forgetting aching head and limbs he charged down the slope after Ching who was darting ahead, quivering with eagerness.

“ Find ’em ! Find ’em, boy ! ” cried Alan, pushing the little soaked sandal under the dog’s nose, and with an encouraging bark

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Ching darted off again, plummy tail waving while Alan followed as eagerly.

Into the soaked thickets of the bush darted Ching and ran here and there seeking . . . sniffing . . . pausing with uplifted paw and little nose quivering from time to time, head raised, round eyes slightly blinking. Then eagerly he ran forward again, wriggling through the wet undergrowth, scrambling over fallen logs so that Alan found it difficult to follow him, or even keep him in sight. At last with nose down to earth he set off at a great pace down a wet glade of ferns and was lost to sight, but Alan heard him in a frenzy of muffled barking somewhere in the depths. Following quickly he found himself in a comparatively open glade of tall trees from which the raindrops dripped mournfully. So oppressively still it was that the intermittent drips sounded almost like thunder in Alan's strained ears and the restless hopping of a solitary bird from twig to twig seemed painfully loud in the hot steamy silence.

Even before he reached them Alan saw the

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two little forms clasped in each other's arms, the little dog quivering with eagerness skirmishing around them. But they never stirred and Alan's heart seemed to stand still, so motionless lay those little figures, the girl's bright head bowed upon the boy's shoulder, her childish arms lying laxly about him.

Plainly Alan saw Michael's little brown leg with its childish scratches and bruises thrust out negligently—but so still. He saw Angela's tumbled curls but no breath or motion stirred them to glistening life.

He felt the sweat start on his forehead and his heart beat so hard he could hear it hammer and thud in his side and he passed a shaking hand across his eyes. He felt an odd reluctance to go forward now in very sight of that which he had sought so diligently and then with uneven steps he crossed the space between them. What would he see?

“Oh, Kitty!” he whispered and felt the little dog pressing close to his leg with a whimper. The next moment he was on his knees beside the children. “Thank God!

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Oh, thank God ! ”—the childish breasts were rising and falling in deep exhausted sleep, the little faces though smudged and tear-stained and marred by insect bites were tranquil. Feeling suddenly weak and sick Alan drew them both into his arms with a dry sob of thankfulness while the little dog in a frenzy of excited affection began licking the children’s hands and bare legs and whining with pleasure, his tawny plume waving triumphantly.

Angela’s forget-me-not blue eyes opened languidly, her curly head drooped with a sigh of contentment on the man’s shoulder. Alan was inexpressibly touched by that little nestling movement of confidence and faith and as she stirred again murmuring “ Michael — is he—— ? ” he answered heartily : “ Right as a trivet. Here, he is beside you.”

Suddenly Angela began to cry and Michael’s dazed blue eyes filled too with a blur of tears and he fetched a frightened sob or two.

“ There ! There ! ” Alan soothed them. “ Not a thing to cry about now, little woman. Just you take a little sup of this.”

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Eagerly they drank the hot beef-tea and weak brandy Alan poured from the small Thermos flask he carried, and when Angela with a pale smile sat up and Michael with a wry face pushed away the cup and gave a little weak laugh at Ching who was alternately trying to lick his cheek and get his share of the beef-tea, Alan was satisfied.

“Good old Snub-nose !” he said, patting the dog. “He is certainly the hero of the piece.”

“And,” said Angela with a pale flash of her usual self-confidence, “I am the lady hero, aren’t I ? But his name isn’t Snub-nose . . . it’s Jessie but Miss Wells calls him Ching.”

“I call him Jack,” said Michael.

“The other lady said we stealed him——”

“Stole,” said Michael, and then with a half-fearful look around, “Don’t let the pleece-man get us, Uncle Alan.”

“No fear of that,” replied Alan, “why, he’s been looking for you for hours.”

“Looking for us ? ” ; two pairs of wide blue eyes sought his fearfully.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

“Yes, but only to give you back to Auntie Kitty,” Alan reassured them. “He’s a fine fellow that policeman and the only person he really dislikes is Jessie-Jack-Ching Wells.”

The children broke into relieved smiles and Alan gently assisted them to their feet. With intervals for rest he got them out to the edge of the bush, and leaving Ching on guard he went off to reconnoitre.

As it was impossible to take them through the paddock of the bull, he sought for and found a safe means of getting back to the road.

The children, however, seemed weak and tired after their ordeal and the going was slow. Several times he had to carry one or the other of them for a short spell and he was, as he himself expressed it, “all in” when at last they reached the roadway and the waiting car, with head splitting and heart pounding, while flashes of light seemed to come and go queerly in front of his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

ALL'S WELL

SOME hours later Angela, after a long refreshing sleep was lying on the couch in Miss Wells' little old-fashioned sitting-room with Aunt Kitty sitting beside her, stroking her hair fondly.

Michael was on the floor toying rather languidly with his third cake and sharing it with Ching who was proudly wearing a little silver pendant of Aunt Kitty's which she had hung round his neck, declaring it to be the Order of the Good Bloodhound.

"But Uncle Alan should have one too," declared Michael, "'cos he found us too."

"Oh, Aunt Kitty," put in Angela eagerly, "Uncle Alan doesn't hate us any more. I asked him and he said certingly not, stuff an'

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nonsense and he kissed us when he found us and he looked like he was going to cry."

"Only men don't cry!" said Michael sagely. "But Uncle Alan doesn't hate us, you know; he said we was his little pals and I said he would have to play he was an explorer like the Picture 'Darkest Africa,' and so he said, 'Dr. Livingstone, I persume——'"

"And it was then he wiped his eyes and pretended he was blowing his nose," put in the observant Angela.

Kitty laughed with a choke in her voice as she hugged both children and the dog impartially.

"Of course," she said, "Uncle Alan doesn't hate you. The idea of such a thing!"

"But you said it," Michael reminded her accusingly.

"Well, little pitchers shouldn't have had such long ears in the middle of the night," said Kitty. "I made a very big and foolish mistake. He couldn't hate you! A man like Uncle Alan!"

But she thought drearily; it is me he hates

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or at least is indifferent to now, and it is my own fault. I've been unreasonable and unkind, but oh ! he might have made some allowance for my miserable anxiety and forgiven my bad temper.

When Alan had returned to Miss Wells' house with the bedraggled and exhausted children Kitty had been absent with one of the search-parties, but what wounded her was that instead of going post-haste to find her with the joyful news, he had contented himself with sending another messenger after her and had not even waited at the house for her, or her thanks. He had gone away merely leaving a message that he would come round later to drive them all home when the children were properly rested. Kitty, it seemed, had sinned past forgiveness and at the thought she set her soft red lips in a firm proud line. Very well, if Alan felt like that about it she would never by word or look refer to the hopes they had shared of a happy future together, though her heart might break in silence. But in spite of all, her heart was so filled with gratitude

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towards him for his part in the return of the children that she was prepared to meet him in all friendliness and thankfulness and to try to convey to him her contriteness at having so misjudged him. When she heard his voice in the hall her heart beat so suffocatingly and the blood rushed up into her cheeks and then receded suddenly, so that she looked unnaturally pale as he came into the room.

“Hulloa, kids—all set again?” he said, “hulloa, Kitty!” and he snapped his fingers at Ching who was chasing himself round and round with delirious barkings to indicate pleasure at the arrival of a friend and then rushed at Alan’s feet and began to worry his shoelaces with little growling noises.

“Oh, Alan,” exclaimed Kitty, and her voice shook while the fluttering red and white in her cheeks came and went exquisitely, and her blue eyes shone like stars, “how—how ever can I thank you——”

“Don’t try, Kitty, please,” he smiled, but his voice to her sounded remote and impersonal

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and she blundered on, hot-cheeked, stammering :

“ I—I must—and—and please forgive all my—my—unjust——”

Her voice faltered into silence. Would he not help her out with her bitter confession? She hesitatingly put out her hands and then let them fall to her sides, intolerably stung. Actually, incredibly, Alan was ignoring her little gesture of contrition and acknowledgment, for he pushed past her and threw himself heavily into a chair. Kitty's face turned scarlet at the rebuff; it was as if she had received a slap in the face and as her colour rose so did her temper. To think that Alan should so deliberately humiliate her, should harbour revengeful, unforgiving thoughts.

“ Of course,” she said furiously, “ if that's the way you feel about it, there's no more to say except that, grateful as I am for your trouble over the children, I—I am sorry I attempted any apology. All I said of your self-centredness was really true and I

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repeat—— Oh, Alan ! Alan ! ” she screamed suddenly, “ what is the matter ? You are ill ! ”

She had caught sight of his face now, white as paper with bright spots on the cheek-bones, and livid shadows under the eyes and round his mouth ; his head was lolling grotesquely over the chair-back, his eyes were closed.

At Kitty's cry Angela rushed into the hall crying hysterically : “ Come quickly ! Uncle Alan's dropped down dead,” and in an instant Miss Wells was in the room.

“ Fainted ! ” she said briefly. “ Go out, children—there's nothing to be frightened of. Loosen his collar, Miss Blair ; I'll get the brandy.”

“ Oh, my poor boy ! My poor boy ! ” wailed Kitty, trying with trembling fingers to loosen Alan's collar. “ Oh, Miss Wells—what made him do that ? I was certainly a little cross with him, but——”

“ What could you expect,” asked Miss Wells brusquely as she measured out a portion of spirits. “ A man just out of a sick-bed—

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rushing about in the pouring rain—up most of the night—anxiety—worry——”

“A sick-bed? What do you mean?” Kitty’s eyes were tragic.

“You knew he was only just up from a bad bout of influenza?” said Miss Wells taking Alan’s head against her shoulder and preparing to administer the remedy.

“Influenza? I hadn’t an idea! Oh, my poor, darling Alan—and I was so cruel to you. Here, let me take him, Miss Wells——”

With scant ceremony she pushed her hostess aside and cradled her lover’s ruffled dark head against her breast, holding the brandy to his lips. Alan sighed and opened his eyes to find Kitty’s little white face transfigured by tenderness, her blue eyes luminous with tears, bending over him. She was quivering with love and remorse.

“Kitty,” he whispered weakly, “what’s up? Have I been an idiot? That beastly ’flu——”

“Drink this, dear!” a tear fell and gently touched his hand.

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Obediently he sipped and after a moment a more normal colour came back to his cheeks and he struggled to sit up but Kitty gently restrained him.

“Never did that before in my life!” he muttered.

“Lie still, my poor, darling boy!” Kitty whispered, venturing to brush his cheek with her quivering lips, soft as the touch of a butterfly’s wing.

Miss Wells had quietly slipped away with the children; Alan turned his head and his lips met Kitty’s in a long kiss of reconciliation and happiness.

“Ah!” he sighed, “that’s worth it all! I’ve—I’ve been frightfully blue, Kit!”

“Me too,” whispered Kitty, “but I’ve a bone to pick with you—why didn’t you tell me you’d been ill . . . instead of telling Miss Wells?” she added jealously.

“I didn’t really intend to make a mother-confessor of Miss Wells or anyone,” he said with a languid smile, “but when I got back here with the kids, I felt so rottenly queer I

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told her I'd better clear out and lie down somewhere, so I went back to the house where I stayed last night and I fell asleep—I woke up in a hurry and afraid you might have gone I came along here and—made an ass of myself.”

“Poor boy ! And there was I so hateful to you, and you so ill ! ”

“Well, I haven't been such an angel of good temper myself. I suppose it was that poisonous 'flu coming on. I say though—I hope I'm not going to have a second dose. My landlady's a rattling good sort but as a sick nurse when pain and anguish wring the brow—oh, Lord ! ”

“You don't imagine,” Kitty exclaimed indignantly, “that anyone but me—but I—which is it?—is going to be allowed to look after you now. You are coming straight home with me and Mother and I will take care of you and coddle you until you are fit to take care of yourself.”

“That will be heaven ! ” sighed Alan wearily closing his eyes. “Kitty, put your

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little cool hand on my forehead—I used to dream that—but don't kiss me again. The beastly thing's so catching and I've been a selfish brute to let you run the risk. Darling ! ”

For answer she stooped and kissed his hot forehead, and then laid her little cool hand there with exquisite gentleness.

* * * *

It was three months later that Kitty and Alan, strolling in the garden in the cool of the evening overheard a conversation between two small people playing on the lawn with a little tawny dog, which now spent almost as much of his time with his young friends as he did with his mistress.

“ Let's play weddings,” suggested Angela. “ When Aunt Kitty and Uncle Alan are married next month I'm going to be Auntie's bridesmaid.”

“ Well, I'll be Uncle Alan's,” declared Michael instantly.

“ Don't be silly ! You can't ! ” said Angela crushingly. “ You're a boy—boys can't be

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bridesmaids and wear a silk frock and a basket of roses."

"Well, what can I be?"

"You can only be a bridegroom."

"Well, I'll be Uncle Alan's bridegroom. What do I have to do?"

"Nothing!" replied Angela. "I wear a lovely frock and carry the roses and take off Aunt Kitty's glove——"

"Why can't she take it off herself?"

"'Cos it's too tight, I s'pose!"

"Well, what do I do?"

"Oh, you're only the bridegroom. You just stand there . . . that's all they ever do."

"She's putting the bridegroom in his proper place," murmured Alan with a wink at Kitty.

"Where he'll stay, I hope!" she replied with a mischievous smile.

"I'm glad," came Michael's little clear voice, "Uncle Alan doesn't hate us now or else he wouldn't have me for his bridegroom."

A shadow of distress flitted over Kitty's charming little face and she half started forward, but Alan checked her with a pressure

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of the hand, to listen to Angela's reply.

"Uncle Alan didn't hate us—ever," she said, "Aunt Kitty just made a mistake—a big foolish mistake, she said—'cos Uncle Alan's the nicest man in the world—Aunt Kitty told me."

In the shelter of the shrubbery Alan caught a blushing Kitty in his arms and breathed against her ear: "Thanks, darling—for this unsolicited testimonial. Is that true?"

"Well," returned Kitty saucily, "children and fools, they say, speak the truth. I'm no child but perhaps——"

"And no fool either!" Alan interrupted promptly and she made him a mock formal curtsy as the children came dashing through the trees with Ching racing and barking beside them, his tawny flag carried jauntily sideways.

"Aunt Kitty, do come and play weddings with us—you and Uncle Alan; it'll be practice," cried Angela. "Michael's got it all wrong."

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“ I have not so,” contradicted the little boy with flushed earnestness.

“ You have so ! ” retorted Angela. “ He says he’s going to cut the cake, but he has not to. He’s only a bridegroom and they don’t cut the cake, do they ? ”

“ But—but——” Michael blustered. “ Why should you do everything ? Look here, Uncle Alan—Angel is going to carry the basket of roses and take off Aunt Kitty’s glove and—and—everything. She hasn’t left a thing for me.”

“ Never mind, old chap,” Alan swung the boy off his feet, “ you’re going to shine too. You’ll be best man at the wedding.”

“ Then,” declared Angela promptly, “ I’ll be best lady.”

“ You can’t be,” Michael said positively, “ ’cos Aunt Kitty will be best lady of all ; won’t she, Uncle Alan ? ”

“ Right again, old lad ! ” replied Alan affectionately rumpling the boy’s fair hair, “ the very best—first lady in the land—to me

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at least," he added smiling contentedly at Kitty.

But Angela must have the last decisive word :

"Then I'll be the very best bridesmaid in the world," she said impressively.

THE END



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